ALEKSEY SAVCHENKO

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Annotation

Classic Cyberpunk with some refreshing twists Set in a dystopian future, humanity has escaped the decaying physical landscape of Earth by transferring its collective conciseness into the digital world known as the Cyberside. Though designed to be a utopia, the Cyberside has quickly devolved into a chaotic, dangerous digital landscape. The story follows two main characters: a monster hunter, James Reynolds, and an “information vampire”, Matilda. James has lived his entire life in the Cyberside as his stoic, no-nonsense persona, “Taciturn.” Matilda, on the other hand, is a frenzied bundle of emotions and desires. Originally hired to eliminate the Matilda, James finds himself at the center of a diabolical conspiracy. Together they will journey to reload the supervising AI System and unveil the mystery behind its original architecture. A world to explore, a message to consider… Cyberside is a science fiction novel that explores human emotions. Written with a focus on characters as much as technology, Cyberside is an allegorical take on the role of progress and technology in the modern world; while focusing on recapturing humanity in an otherwise cold, often inhuman landscape. It’s a journey through the tech ridden world of the Cyberside through the eyes of two disparate characters thrust into an adventure together. A love letter to our favorites Both Aleksey and Bert are video game professionals, technology geeks, and committed gamers with more than 20 years of the experience in narrative direction. Be ready to spot hints, nods, and Easter Eggs to the games, movies and TV series that have help shaped their creative tastes.

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Aleksey Savchenko and Bert Jennings
CYBERSIDE

DEDICATION

To my beautiful wife Victoria and my son Kyryl for all the love and understanding they give me, to my family and "extended" family at Epic Game and all the game industry that have always been my never-ending source of inspiration.

To my very good friend Alice, who once told me that it doesn't make any sense to be afraid of anything and so I never did again.

Aleksey

For my Father, thank you for sharing the love of reading with me.

Bert

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Thanks to Alexander, Sergey, Chris, Scott, Evan, Svetlana, Olesya, Tim, Mike, Ilya, and Michael. Without your help, this book will probably won't be written.

Aleksey

For Scott and Evan, without either of you, Cyberside would not be a reality.

Bert

Chapter 1: “Taciturn”

His worn, dusty jacket normally feels like a second skin, but as Taciturn stands at the crossroads overlooking the valley below, he contemplates taking it off. Even as the sun sinks behind him, he can’t help but notice how warm it is.

Unusually so.

It’s likely nothing more than the byproduct of an overloaded network, or perhaps simply a remnant of faulty code. But by any reckoning, something doesn’t feel right. This far out into the Cyberside, details are often overlooked. How many people even know about the sleepy cattle community before him? Nestled within rolling hills, the meager township barely merits a *first* look, let alone a second. Taciturn supposes that may be precisely the point.

A warm breeze stirs the thin strands of black hair straying from beneath his bullhide hat. With one hand, he pulls the wide brim down to just above his eyes. His other hand rests on the grip of the pistol holstered low on his thigh. As his fingers slide across the polished grain, Taciturn inventories his remaining cartridges, his eyes scanning the heads-up overlay before him. Satisfied with his findings he nods the display away.

“Not making that mistake again.”

The wind picks up, and a cloud of information dust swirls in the heat, forming a dust devil. He tracks the vortex of discarded data as it begins its meandering journey down towards the serene landscape below. Modest cottages and unassuming frame homes cluster around a main street of shops and businesses running parallel with the nearby riverbank. Even from a distance, it’s not difficult to mark the decidedly suspicious lack of activity throughout the quiet countryside.

This rural, family-centric paradise had once beckoned new Cyberside arrivals to establish a life far from the hustle and bustle of the ever-more-congested real-world cities. Enticed by the promise of a simpler way of life, the settlers had come in their droves, hoping to start anew.

Whatever rustic wholesomeness those earnest pilgrims had once come seeking, a palpable pall now hangs over these territories, the state of the remaining community a mute testament to the radically-diminished population. Relegated to a small cluster of data nodes on some server in the Real World, this town represents just a minute, backwater portion of the sprawling, generated world known as the Cyberside. Much like the run-down state of the township, the Cyberside is, if not a broken dream, then at least an eroded one.

“Well, better get this over with,” Taciturn mutters, to no one in

particular. As he moves closer to the town, its dilapidation becomes increasingly more apparent. As one of the early-generation colonies within the Cyberside, this place – and so many others like it – had been one of the initial creations meant to offer humanity refuge from a dying planet – a digital escape designed to be a utopia. And destined to become a ruin.

A hawk cries out somewhere above him. Squinting into the sky, Taciturn continues muttering to himself.

"For a new home, we sure brought a lot of horrors."

A ping to his communicator brings his attention back to the road. Stopping to push the bridge of his glasses up the ridge of his nose, he acknowledges the transmission and scans the Locale interface.

"Locale 26-5, this is James Reynolds, requesting access."

The sound of his real name, even from his own lips, still makes him wince. It's information he begrudgingly relinquishes when dealing with different Locales, an all-around unfortunate reminder of things past. These days, he goes by the name of his profession – Taciturn. The name for the silent, ruthless, efficient mercenaries who roam the Cyberside. The word *Taciturn* has long carried weight in the digital realm – a world that's quickly devolved into a new Wild West.

Taciturns live without homes, taking on all manner of jobs, never asking too many questions – and naturally keeping to themselves. It's not a path many would choose, but it suits James just fine.

The ruminations on his chosen career-path are interrupted by a soft, friendly female voice eerily devoid of accent, inflection or the slightest suggestion of regional derivation.

"Welcome, Mr. Reynolds, to Locale 26-5, known to residents as 'Homestead.' From our scans, it seems…"

Taciturn interrupts the program. "Yes, your scan is correct. I have no permanent Locale index." As a gun-for-hire, he's has lost count of how many times he's had this conversation, and he knows it by heart. "I'm simply declaring a request for a temporary visit." Methodically, he recites the catechism for which the Locale Program is already queuing up queries. "Reason for visit, business. Intended visit duration, less than 24 hours. Occupation, Taciturn. No previous visits to this Locale." ("And no future ones if I can help it," he finishes, under his breath.)

He takes this last opportunity to survey the township from a distance, waiting for a response. After a few seconds of silence, he wonders if his rote recital has somehow overwhelmed the outdated program with too much information. Eventually, the female voice responds.

"Thank you for your information, James Reynolds. Welcome. As acting protocol, let me wish you a pleasant stay in Homestead. If there

is any additional information you require, I have access to over thirty exciting tourist—"

"What are your permanent indexation settings, Locale?" Another just-too-long pause. Apparently, this outlying interface is even more outdated than he first suspected.

"I must inform you, Mr. Reynolds, that due to my current settings, you will be permanently registered to the region in 24 hours after crossing the border."

Sighing in frustration, Taciturn asks, "Permanent indexation restrictions and regulations?"

He braces himself, and the disembodied, irksomely-polite voice offers information that has far-reaching potential consequences for him.

"You wouldn't be allowed to leave Locale boarders without filing a request to the Prime Locale in the West Coast HQ. While awaiting clearance, you will be subject to all regional rules and regulations. If indexed, you will be provided with necessary accommodation and a designated vocational assignment option that fits this Locale's requirem—"

"No further inquiries." The disembodied voice continues to speak, but he waves the connection closed.

The cautionary notice of permanent indexation hardly surprises him. A bit of particularly-toxic fallout from the Traffic Wars, peremptory indexation is a means of keeping populations in their place – or, more accurately, keeping them where the ruling powerhouses of the Cyberside want them. The details vary from Locale to Locale, but all are founded upon the same principle: Stay in an area too long without proper certification and you're stuck there. In most cases, it's as quick as 24 hours. Taciturn toggles his overlay to showcase Locale 26-5's Indexation Border.

The world around him changes color to a sickly green as he cycles through settings. Thirty feet down the gently-sloping road into town, he can clearly see the pulsating, dotted lines that encompass the surrounding region and disappear into the distance. Frowning, he toggles the setting back and the world returns to the golds and reds of the surrounding countryside, awash in the hues of sunset.

As a man without an index, Taciturn is used to being on the move. His life in the Cyberside consists of moving from place to place, Locale to Locale, contract to contract. Now knowing where the Indexation Border lies, he resumes his trek down the hill.

Peremptory Indexation: Taciturn lets *that* bitter pill roll around on his tongue for a bit. To become permanently addressed is to give up any option of moving freely throughout the Cyberside – not an acceptable option. Add to that, indexation means having to follow

someone else's rules – and from his experience, most of the digital world's overlords don't keep their subjects' well-being in the forefront of their minds. Like the other remaining Taciturns, James lives on the fringes of the Cyberside's virtual infrastructure and completes jobs, often every bit as dodgy as they are specialized, to make ends meet. There is always – at least, so far – demand for someone who can move as freely as only the Taciturn can. Which is why he now finds himself at the edge of this quiet little town, hunting a monster.

Taciturn checks his holster one more time, sliding the pistol in and out, gauging the smoothness of the draw. Satisfied, he reaches into his chest pocket and removes a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He shakes the box; three sticks bounce around inside it. Moving the pack to his mouth, he removes one and lights it. With a slow, deliberate inhale, Taciturn closes his eyes and lets the smoke fill his lungs. The nicotine cloud is as illusory as everything else here, but sets off a welcome bloom of warmth in his body just the same. It's a habit from his pre-Cyberside life, but even in this full-spectrum simulation of a new existence, old habits die hard. More importantly, it's one of the few pre-Cybercide holdovers that help him feel alive.

Cracking his back, he moves down the road. With a final deliberate step, he crosses the Indexation Border, and a quick ringing in his ears seems to harmonize with a ping from his watch. Glancing down, James sees the timepiece begin counting down from twenty-four hours. Gritting his teeth, he picks up his pace. At the bottom of the hill, he passes a weathered, splintered sign with chipped paint. It reads *Welcome to Homestead*. Finished with his cigarette, he sighs and flicks the butt at the sign.

Homestead's outskirts are silent and abandoned. A lone goat chews on grass outside a derelict building. Taciturn slows his breathing and clears his mind. Each step he takes disturbs the dust at his feet – cold, pulverized, once-important files and long-overwritten routines now reduced to particulate clouds, drifting and swirling before once again coating the parched earth with layers of dead data. The myth that data lasts forever is just that, a myth. Absent the most diligent, tireless maintenance – and too often in spite of it – everything falls apart. Even deleted files leave remnants of their dissolution. Information dust is inescapable throughout the Cyberside.

And the sheer amount of dirt surrounding and permeating this town is just as wrong as it is off-putting.

By the time he reaches Main Street, the sun has nearly concluded its slow descent behind the hills, casting lunging shadows on the buildings around him. Distant music drifts towards him from somewhere ahead, down the street. A strange folkish tune, the melody

abruptly morphs into a rendition of an old, pre-Cyberside band: Creedence Clearwater Revival. As usual, the System makes a more-or-less correct assessment of his musical tastes and has chosen to play 'As Long as I Can See the Light.' He pauses, just for a moment, to process this change. The System is the automated, supervising network that runs the Cyberside. Its decision to change the music to James' tastes isn't unusual, but it's still a distraction. And distractions can get people killed.

Identifying the source of the music, Taciturn approaches a saloon. Stepping through the door of the establishment, he quickly assesses its patrons. As a venue, it's nothing out of the ordinary. It's an American attempt at approximating a European beer-house. Decorated in a wildly indiscriminate fusion of Germanic heritage and other, decidedly Southwestern, cattle-centric motifs, the establishment plays up the myriad tropes of the town's history – a history that doesn't actually exist.

A tired-looking, homely waitress serves frosty beers to a middle-aged couple. Two young women sit at a booth near the corner, talking quietly, while a teenage boy ogles them from across the room. A weathered farmer picks without detectable enthusiasm at the plate of food in front of him.

One thing becomes apparent as soon as Taciturn crosses the threshold of the saloon. The air in the room thickens with apprehension.

Ignoring the multiple, covert glances aimed at him from all corners of the room, he takes a seat at the bar counter and signals the waitress.

"How's it going, darling? When you get a chance, a cup of coffee would be great."

Hesitantly, the waitress pours him a cup of hot, dark liquid.

"Thanks," he says, scanning about for the sugar – and taking in the saloon's other patrons.

An elderly woman knits in the corner, seemingly oblivious of any of the other customers. Three young men sit at the counter nursing beers they're barely old enough to have ordered. A man with a large cowboy hat sits alone in a booth and pushes an empty plate across the table. These customers do little to mask their instinctual distrust of anyone and anything around them, and James can't entirely blame them. With so much information dust coating the streets, things clearly haven't been going well for Homestead.

The patron with the large hat stands up and approaches the bar. Taciturn takes a moment to evaluate the man moving towards him. The man's cowboy demeanor exhibits some authority, but his attire fairly screams Caricature: Cartoonishly-proportioned hat, oversized,

gaudy belt buckle, and garishly-loud boots.

Taciturn tries not to smile while stirring his coffee, even as the man pulls out the bar stool next to him.

Placing his hat intrusively close to Taciturn's cup, the man gestures to the waitress.

"Dolores. Be a sweetheart and get me the usual."

The cowboy turns his attention to Taciturn.

"Howdy, stranger. The name's Oliver Day. You don't mind if I sit here, do yah?"

Not waiting for a response, the man settles into the seat.

"I'm the sheriff 'round here, and since we don't get many visitors nowadays, figured I'd welcome you personally to Homestead."

Without turning to regard him, Taciturn can nevertheless feel the lawman sizing him up. "Thanks, Sheriff."

"Don't mention it – but say, it's hard to make a proper introduction without knowing each other's names, don't you think?" The sheriff slides his hat across the counter, away from Taciturn's cup. "Seeing as you know mine, figure it's only fair to ask yours."

Taciturn sips his coffee, debating if he should give his chosen name or his real one. Giving either could serve a purpose; he briefly scans the room again and knows which one he needs to start with. "It's James."

"James…?"

"Just James." Finally, he turns to face the man. "I appreciate the warm welcome, Oliver. If it makes this easier, just check my registry with your Locale Program. You'll see my profession listed as Taciturn. As such, I'm sure you can understand my desire to keep things from getting *too* personal."

A glass of bourbon arrives at the counter via Dolores' trembling hands. Still staring at the newcomer to his town, Oliver thanks the waitress. James assumes the Sherriff is attempting to access information from the same program he encountered earlier.

"Ok, listen… 'just James': This is a peaceful town, and I'd prefer it stay that way. We don't need any trouble here from you mercenary types. Best mind your manners while you're here, and we won't have any problems."

Taciturn returns his attention back to his coffee, talking to the sheriff through the corner of his mouth.

"It's funny, Oliver. I heard things were pretty far from peaceful in Homestead. In fact, the way I hear it, for such a small town, you've been having quite a lot of problems recently." Taciturn lets this sink in, and then continues. "Of course, I'm not calling you a *liar*. I'm just suggesting we have a friendly conversation about all the troubles your community *isn't* having."

The room goes quiet.

James calmly sips more of his coffee and knows he's hit the right nerve. He glances up at the wall-length mirror behind the counter and watches the patrons pay close, false attention to their meals and drinks. The sudden absence of patron-chatter makes it thunderingly apparent how focused they are on the exchange between the town's sheriff and the mysterious stranger.

Oliver's shoulders lose some of their authoritative rigidity. "Well, James, you might not be too far from the truth. Matter of fact, if you're truly a Taciturn, this town might have need of someone with your particular expertise."

Seizing the opening, James waves to the waitress. "Dolores, was it? Could I get one of whatever he's drinking?" Within moments, a fresh glass and a half bottle of bourbon have been placed in front of them.

A few drinks in, the sheriff is well on his way to elaborating on the community's problems.

"We noticed something wrong a while back but couldn't figure out what was causing the trouble. When we did… well… I'll just say it plain. I hope you've had experience hunting demons, James."

"I've been known to." Taciturn says, before taking a calculated, slow sip of the brown liquid. "Last time I was out this far was Locale 24-9."

Oliver furrows his brow, staring deeply into his glass. "Christ, 24-9? Are you talking about the Bakersfield Incident? From what we heard, not many of you mercs made it out of that shitshow in one piece."

In truth, James is surprised that much detail at all has traveled this far out, and he'd just as soon not recall any more detail than necessary. He picks up his own glass gazing into its new depths. "Yeah."

Oliver shakes his head in disbelief. "Damn. Still… you took out the last nest of Stack Rats. That's got to count for something. Your arrival could be just the break we've been looking for. I think it's safe to say we have a pretty good idea of what's terrorizing us, James. There's a… *Scry* on the loose."

Taciturn makes no sound or visible movement at the utterance of the word – but he feels the hairs at the back of his neck standing up. His mind jams up with a torrent of vivid images, none of them welcome. The dangerous mutations were created when humanity first downloaded its collective consciousness into the digital world. Defects in the process, turning people into *monsters*.

Once upon a time in the Real World, the Scry would have gone by the name *succubus,* or *vampire*. In the Cyberside, their name is

shorthand for their well-developed ability to break through a victim's firewalls and drain their life, identity, and skills. After the Scry have taken everything, only information dust remains.

And there is *so* much dust in this town.

James comes back to himself and finds that Oliver is still speaking: "At first the disappearances were few and random, but soon it was whole farms. Men, woman, and children, being taken at night. We sent out search parties but never found anything or anyone."

Taciturn takes another drink from his glass. "And what makes you sure it's a Scry?"

Oliver shakes his head. "See, that's the thing. We thought it might have been raiders, but there were no signs of *struggle* at the ranches. No bullet holes. No locks broken. Only that damn *dust* everywhere. It's almost as if—"

And Taciturn finishes the sheriff's sentence.

"—As if something were *welcomed* in. Yeah, that fits the pattern of a Scry. Still, something doesn't seem…" Taciturn deliberately derails his own train of thought by pouring more of the bourbon into his glass.

Confirming his assumption that everyone has been eavesdropping, the old woman yells out. "Have you dealt with one of these Scry before? Is it really true what they say about them?"

Before responding, Taciturn takes a moment to consider how truly terrible the bourbon tastes. Then he turns his attention to how he can best answer the question. Looking around the room, a plan begins to form in his mind. He doesn't want to start a panic, just yet.

"I guess that depends on what you've heard. Scry differ in their approaches. The…" James takes a moment to internally debate terminology, then continues. "The creature typically presents itself as an attractive person, or a helpless being. I don't know. Maybe your missing townsfolk saw an injured teenager, maybe a lost child. That's how it gets you to welcome it. To invite it in."

"But what do they *do* to you?" asks another unsteady voice from elsewhere in the saloon.

The crowd is responding as expected, and Taciturn continues.

"Again, it depends. Once inside, a Scry will deceive you and your family with an artificial sincerity. It won't even have to tear down your personal firewalls; *you'll* do it. All while the creature tries to access your personal logs – logs it pores over for any information it can use to string you further along. It wants you emotionally *invested* in it." The words are like bile in James' throat.

A frightened Dolores mutters, "So it can eat your insides…"

Lowering his voice so only Oliver can hear, Taciturn mutters, "Look, Sheriff, maybe you'd like to take this conversation somewhere

else…"

The sheriff pours more of the bourbon into his glass. "No, James. These people have a right to know what's happened to their friends."

Aware that everyone's attention is focused on him, James continues. "Once the victim becomes emotionally invested, the Scry will infect their target's directories with a virus. One that increases the victim's attraction to it."

Taciturn downs the rest of his drink, and the sheriff follows suit. "In the end, you become so immersed you don't even notice the Scry's final move. With your barriers down, it feeds on your life force picking apart and consuming everything that makes you who you are."

The silence may mean he's said too much. James waits for Oliver to speak next.

"Sounds to me, mercenary, that you know these… *things* well enough. Okay, it's a good thing you came along. But how do you kill it?"

Taciturn cracks his knuckles. "I've found bullets work just as well as the next thing." Letting his words sink into the room, he sets his own plan in motion. Standing up, he places some credit chips on the counter – to everyone's apparent confusion.

"Wait, where are you going?"

Taciturn nods a thanks to the waitress and turns to Oliver.

"Me? I'm going to set up camp outside of town. Sounds like you folks have a Scry problem. I'm just passing through."

The commotion boils behind him as he heads for the doors. A confused Oliver, just slightly staggering now, follows him into the street.

"What the hell, James? I thought you were here to help. Is it about money? Our town might not look like much, but we can scrape together whatever it takes to hire a Taciturn."

James stops and looks into the Sheriff's glossy eyes. "I am here to help. But something I didn't mention in there is that Scry can take the appearance of anyone they've consumed." He lets his eyes linger on the sheriff's for a moment. "*Any*one."

Taciturn waits while Oliver processes this new information. The Sheriff is unable to hide his horror, which at least *appears* genuine. James makes a mental note of it.

"You're saying someone in *there…?"* He hooks a thumb back over his shoulder.

The mercenary raises his hands, palms outward. "*Could* be. Even if it's not… either way, I didn't want to cause a panic."

Oliver shakes his head and gestures back to the saloon. "Well, you sure coulda fooled me, James! Everyone in there is losing their *minds*

right about now! I don't know how or if I'm gonna be able to douse *that* fire!"

James shrugs. "Then don't. Let the gossip circulate. About a Taciturn that's come to town. Then tell them how you convinced me to help solve that little problem you've acquired. And *make sure the word spreads.* I want this creature to know that I'm here for it."

The sheriff's forehead wrinkles as he conducts his own delayed negotiations with the bourbon. "Wait, yeah – no, I get it. I think. But shouldn't we discuss your fee?"

He mulls over Oliver's question. This is something that's been bothering him since he started talking to the lawman.

"Oliver, I've already been contracted for this job. I'd assumed it came from someone higher than you. Does this town have a Mayor or something?"

More confusion washes over Oliver's face. "What? No, that doesn't make any sense. I guess it could have been the Mayor, but he disappeared a few weeks ago. No one has come forward, to my knowledge."

Taciturn frowns. He's taken on prior contracts with few enough questions asked – but something about this whole operation seems off. The town's sheriff should have known about James coming. Still, if there's a Scry on the loose—

"Hmm… I see. Well, looks like someone's looking out for you. Better get inside and do your part, Oliver."

The Homestead sheriff stops halfway back to the pub and turns around. "Wait a second, James. How do you know *I'm* not the Scry?"

Without looking back, Taciturn strides towards the outskirts of town.

"I don't," he calls back over his shoulder. "But if you are, you'll still want to protect your hunting grounds. If that's the case, you'll know where to find me."

It's dark by the time he reaches an acceptable location. Taciturn approaches one of the abandoned buildings at the town's edge. James assumes it belonged to one of the Scry's victims. He puts his weight on the door, and it gives. Inside, he prepares for the inevitable encounter.

Rearranging the furniture, James takes some of the broken pieces of wood and starts a blaze in the fireplace. He unrolls his sleeping bag, hiding his pistol inside it. Now it's a waiting game. He sits down and warms himself by the roaring fire. As the flames consume the wood, his mind begins to drift. He watches the dancing cast shadows on a nearby chair. With a broken leg, it leans towards the flames as if it too is trying to soak up whatever warmth it can in this lifeless house. James yawns and studies the rest of the room, trying to keep his mind active. Something about the fading wallpaper seems familiar. Styled

like an old navigational chart, it maps the Old World in great detail, but the fringes of the New World are filled with serpents and mermaids. James has seen these creatures before, but in an old memory he's locked away. As his eyelids become heavy, that memory gets the best of him.

#

It's a memory he's seen before. Countless, painful times. His son, Timothy, eagerly tries to wake him, but James pretends not to hear. Another sleepless night at work, stuck in yet another brutal crunch cycle before the current project's delivery date. But how does one explain any of this to a child?

"Dad, Dad, Dad! Hey *Da-a-a-a-a-ad!"*

The younger James Reynolds opens his eyes and sees the decorative wallpaper of his bedroom. Sea monsters and mermaids stare back at him. James is still surprised that his wife has let him keep it. Rubbing his bloodshot eyes, James looks over to see the gap-toothed smile of his son. The clock on the nightstand mocks him with the knowledge that he's only slept four hours.

"Where's your mother?" James asks.

"She's taking Ninja for a walk," Timothy says, happily, now that he's finally summoned his father back to life. To further celebrate his victory, Timothy begins bouncing on the bed.

"She tried waking you up, but you just kept snoring. You'll miss everything if you sleep in, Dad."

Scoffing at the notion that he's 'slept in', James groggily kicks off the warm comfort of his sheets and stretches. Opening the drawer to his nightstand, James pulls out a can of Red Bull and downs half of its contents with one gulp.

Timothy gives the can a disapproving look and says, matter-of-factly, "Mom says that stuff is crap."

"I know," James replies with a smile, "but sometimes adults need to drink something to wake up." He heaves himself up into a sitting position. "And don't say 'crap'."

In the bathroom, the ice-cold water on his face works in tandem with the lukewarm energy drink in his body. Reluctant gears and relays in his head start groaning into operation.

Standing by his father's side, Timothy looks up impatiently.

"Hurry up, Dad. You said we're going to the park today."

James' haggard reflection in the mirror stares back at him. He lets out a defeated sigh.

"Tim…"

Timothy knows his father's tone all too well.

"But you promised."

Reluctantly, James looks down.

"I know kiddo, but Dad has to go back to work today. Everyone's working hard…"

Before his father can finish, Timothy is already running out of the bathroom. Sluggishly moving after him, James sees a last, fleeting glimpse of his child dash out the doorway – the doorway that his wife, Sarah, now occupies.

"James, we made plans. You can't keep doing this."

Unfortunately, James also knows his wife's tone just a little too well, and he wishes that *he* could bolt out of the room as easily as his son just has. Shaking his head, James veers off towards the dresser to disengage. His wife isn't having it and alters course to intercept.

"You can't keep letting them do this to you. They can't keep taking advantage of you like this."

James pulls a fresh shirt on over his head.

"Sara, I'm the Chief Software Engineer. I have a responsibility to…"

This is the wrong word-choice, and James regrets it almost instantly.

"Responsibility! You have a *responsibility* to this family. He is your son. I am your wife!"

From down the hallway, James hears the door to Timothy's room slam shut. Tired, hungry, and defeated, James walks past his wife towards the front door. He's already late for work. As he crosses the threshold of his house, the golden rays of the sun mercifully cast his mind in the darkness of digital nothing.

Chapter 2: “The Scry”

Taciturn doesn’t remember falling asleep, and he is already cursing himself as he cautiously opens his eyes. The fire’s dying embers cast a crimson glow across the room, but it takes a few moments to make visual sense of anything.

When he finally spots the creature, every muscle in his body tenses up; James overrides his fight-or-flight instinct to react, but just barely.

The Scry, it seems, has taken the form of a young woman, not much older than 19 or 20. Large brown eyes study him from behind dark bangs. A dirty, camouflage hoodie obscures most of its figure, but slim legs dangle off the side of the rundown counter it sits perched on. Unsure why the creature isn’t moving, he inches his hand towards the pistol he desperately hopes is still tucked within his sleeping bag.

Then the Scry speaks. Whatever James might have expected the creature’s voice to sound like, this isn’t that.

“Whoa, Taciturn. Pump the breaks a sec. There’s no need to jump into this guns blazing.”

The creature tilts its head and *smiles.*

Dumbstruck, James tries to process the unfolding situation. The creature hasn’t attacked him, despite having the upper hand. He sits up slowly, all the while continually gauging the distance between the Scry and his weapon.

“I’m still breathing, so you clearly want something, monster. What?”

The question is blunt, and he doesn’t expect the Scry to answer truthfully. It’s solely to buy him time. A brief scan of his internal systems shows the firewalls and defensive software intact. Taciturn continues to look for any other breaches but the search reveals nothing out of place. His uneasiness intensifies as the creature smiles again. Like most Scry, it has a beautiful smile – a powerful weapon used to disarm its prey.

“Hmm… well, that is an interesting question. I guess I really don’t know. Of all the people sent to kill me lately, you definitely seem the most interesting.”

The creature swings its legs back and forth, still casually perched on the counter.

“And that scene you caused, at the bar? *That* was pretty hilarious. Walking out on them like that? I know your back was turned, but you should have seen their faces.”

The Scry casually surveys the room. There isn’t much to survey.

“So… I don’t know… you seem smart enough to understand when

you're being an idiot, James."

The monster raises an eyebrow.

"It *is* James, right? Or do you prefer Jim?"

Before James can answer, the creature beams with sudden, gleeful inspiration.

"Oh, I know – I'll call you Jimbo!"

This prospect catches James off guard, and his hand momentarily stops inching toward his sleeping bag.

"No, don't call me that. Look, what the *hell—?"*

He listens to himself speaking and goes cold inside. *He's taken the bait and become over-invested with the conversation already.*

James takes a deep breath to calm himself. When he opens his mouth and speaks, it is finally in the voice of a Taciturn.

"What do you *want?"*

The Scry rolls its eyes, taking special care to exaggerate the effect.

"Jeez, dude, where are your manners? Nice to meet you too, Taciturn. I'm Matilda, by the way."

It raises both hands, revealing no weapons – no obvious ones, at any rate. Using one hand the Scry points towards the floor, slides off the counter, and lands gently on its feet.

"All I *want* is for you to think back to when you were first approached for this job. Did anything seem *off* to you? Like, you know, sketchy?"

Taciturn is reluctant to follow any of the Scry's leads at this point, no matter how seemingly-innocuous – but something has been nagging at him ever since his conversation with Oliver. He mimics the Scry's raised-hand gesture, then slowly points to his chest pocket. With the creature's nod of approval, he pulls out a crumpled pack of cigarettes with thumb and forefinger, carefully removes one cigarette and lights it. He wracks his brain, trying to figure out if there was some detail he missed when accepting this contract. It's becoming more apparent that no one from this town actually hired him – but who else would be concerned for the well-being of such a remote settlement?

He starts with the simplest likely answer: The farmers in this town generate resources for somebody, so it isn't unreasonable to assume that someone simply hired him to protect their investment. However, the more he now mulls over the clandestine nature of the contract, the shadier it starts to feel.

In the Cyberside, farmers spend their time turning processing power into consumables such as food, construction materials, or other items essential to the System's economic structure – a straightforward-enough scheme, originally designed to reward the early adopters and first-wave pioneers who set out to establish the digital world. The

System placed a premium value on those doing the heavy lifting, and the design worked well enough until successive throngs of settlers arrived in network-significant numbers. Unfortunately, as with the majority of mass migrations throughout recorded history, ideals were frequently sacrificed at the altar of greed. As the habitability of the physical world waned in the wake of cumulative ecological and radiobiological calamities, ever-greater numbers started transferring their consciousnesses into the Cyberside. When the wealthy elite eventually surrendered their physical bodies, they had no intention of sacrificing their wealth and power. As they entered the network, the System's economic routines faltered. Hacks imposed a feudalistic hierarchy on the Cyberside, with the workers suddenly plummeting to the bottom. What could have been a bold, new world quickly devolved into a decidedly familiar one.

James looks at his cigarette. A long cylinder of ash clings to a burned-down end. The Scry continues to watch him, not saying anything.

In a slow dawn of logic, James finds himself focusing less on the Scry and more on the details of the contract. Poring over the data, he notices the single, glaring detail he can hardly believe he missed. The masking was so conventional, a measure most Taciturns wouldn't even give two consecutive glances. The contract's indexation was masked to mimic Locale 26-5, but its actual point of origin is a far more dangerous quarter of the Cyberside, with which James is all too familiar.

The name escapes him like an expletive. *"Babylon."*

He angrily flicks his cigarette away into the gloom. The Scry beams and claps its hands, just slowly enough, the impudence fine-tuned to the point of mastery.

"Aha! So, the wheels are finally turning in there, huh? Maybe if you hadn't been so eager to fight another *Monster* you would have seen it earlier, Jimmy."

The Scry doesn't wait for him to interject.

"Look, I *get* it. You're a mercenary that likes to deal with glitches… let's say, *directly*. But it's also pretty clear you've got a paragon-complex thing going on. Otherwise, you wouldn't have gotten yourself wrapped up in that Bakersfield Incident. Hell, you were willing to come out all this way just to help this little town. But have you ever stopped to actually think about what you were doing?"

James continues listening to the Scry – 'Matilda' with mounting unease. With each word, each new byte of information, he's becoming more invested. He hears his own words of warning, back in the Homestead saloon – and yet, he can't seem to break his own fixation on the creature before him. But everything the Scry says has the ring

of truth.

Matilda raises an eyebrow, and the captivating smile reappears. Her eyes pierce into his own.

"And now, James, the big question. Why would someone conceal their identity just to trick a Taciturn into killing a Scry? We already know it wouldn't have taken much to convince you in the first place."

He finds himself clenching and unclenching his right hand – a nervous tic he thought he had long ago conquered.

"I don't know, but maybe this is all bullshit."

The raised eyebrow jumps nimbly to the other side of her forehead.

"Come on James, you're so close. Something's clearly going on here with these people."

Taciturn tries to regain the upper hand in this conversation and points an accusing finger at the Scry.

"Let's get one thing straight, 'Matilda'. You're still a Scry. Just because someone put me up to this, doesn't mean you haven't been harming these people."

A soft, dispirited sigh escapes her. "Okay. Granted. I get what you're saying, but just put that aside for one moment. If it isn't me, what's the logical alternative? Why else would people be disappearing?"

He reaches for another cigarette and finds an empty container. Noticing this, the Scry reaches into her jacket pocket and tosses him an unopened pack of Lucky Strikes, which he snatches out of the air. Taciturn is impressed with her mindfulness in even the small matter of his brand-preference, but she doesn't need to know that. The Scry, it would seem, has been observing him longer than he could have suspected. He turns the pack over in his hand, analyzing the code. With no trojan files detected, James cautiously pulls one out and lights it.

"Well, taking you off the table – and I'm not saying I am – I can only think of one alternative. As unlikely as it seems, somebody wants you dead for another reason."

Inhaling, he looks at the girl and raises an eyebrow of his own. Smirking, she nods and gestures for him to continue.

"If people are disappearing out here and it's *not* you, it's most likely slavers. Damn good ones at that, if they didn't leave any traces." He mulls over his own words. "And smart enough to leave dust everywhere. If they want you dead, it's probably because you're mucking up their operations."

Matilda claps her hands in approval.

"All right! Way to go, Gramps! It took you a little while to get there, but I believed in you."

Taciturn regards her blankly. “First, don’t call me that. Second, even with all of that said, we haven’t moved past the fact that *you’re a Scry*. Clearly, you’ve killed people. How can I trust you? What’s really stopping me from killing you right now?”

Matilda’s shoulders sag. Her voice is equal parts indignation and disappointment.

“And you were doing *so* well. Do you need me to spell it out? Yes, I’ve been killing people. That is, if you count slavers as people. I don’t – but if you do, I guess you’re right. We’ve come to an impasse.”

The Scry, like all the other monsters created during the Transition, became one of James’ sworn enemies the moment he chose the Taciturn path. Since then, he has never hesitated in killing them, but this woman’s disarming, cheerful behavior continues to perplex him. James stubs out his cigarette and offers the pack back to her.

“Nah, it’s cool. I don’t smoke.”

Grunting, James puts the pack into his own breast pocket.

“Okay. If we’re going to discuss this, let’s discuss this. Let’s say I believe you – and again, I’m not saying I *do* – why are you telling me all this? Who are you really, and what’s the endgame?”

Matilda breaks eye contact to look out the cracked, dust-filmed window, her sunny expression suddenly eclipsed by a somber one.

“That’s the problem, dude. I don’t remember who I am or how I got here.”

Taciturn stares at her levelly.

“Bullshit.”

The Scry gives a soft, humorless chuckle.

“Yeah, I don’t expect you to believe me, but you wanted the truth. I woke up in this town three months ago and realized that I have… uh… *powers.*”

She shifts her gaze away from the window, back to him.

“The only thing I had is this necklace, with this silly logo on it.”

Matilda grips a dog tag hanging from a chain around her neck and holds it at eye level. Even in the moonlight filtering in through the grimy window, James can tell it’s Titanium. A material with no expiration date. Back in the real world, it would be expensive. In this world, wars would be fought over it.

“Super weird, I know. When I… realized what I could do, I hid. That’s when I first came across the slavers. I guess they figured a lone woman would be easy pickings.”

She leans back on the counter.

“I defended myself – but I knew there would be consequences. It didn’t take long. The first hunter came shortly after. Over the next few months, there’d be five more. Each one different, each one probably more expensive than the last.”

The Scry opens her coat to reveal a collection of knives, their blades gleaming quicksilver in the gloom.

"I'm sure you can imagine the things I've seen and the skills I've learned by… taking them."

James offers no reaction to the glittering, intimate armory strapped to the inner lining of her coat. But he counts the knives.

"You have amnesia? Sure, okay, fine. Let's say I believe your whole story. What… do… you… *want?"*

"Well James, that's a tricky one too. I want two things. First, I need to finish what I've started. I've been hunted all over this region. So, I want to end these slaver bastards once and for all. Like I said, you seem different than the others – and to be honest, I could use the help."

The fist balled at his side opens and clenches, opens again and clenches again.

"Sure, great, a Scry with a conscience. What's the other thing?"

Matilda removes her necklace and tosses it, chain and dog tag, to him. It skitters across the floor to stop at his feet. He tentatively touches the cold, smooth metal tag.

"That's the only clue to who I am, and I want to find out what it means," Matilda says. "As a Scry, I can mimic indexations to get around, sure – but I need someone else who can travel freely. As a Taciturn, that's kind of your deal, right? Help me find out what *that* thing means, and it's yours. That is, unless you're still determined to kill me."

James scoops the necklace off the floor and hefts it in his palm. The titanium tag alone, already enough to pique his interest in its own right, is fairly large as such adornments typically go, nearly closer to a badge than a 'dog tag'. Its uncanny lightness fills him with genuine surprise.

But this surprise is as nothing to his stunned disbelief at the 'silly logo' and inscription he finds on the back of the tag.

FALL WATER LAKE

North Carolina

The company that created the Cyberside.

The company that James Reynolds used to work for.

Struck speechless, James looks up from the tag to see the youthful face of the Scry woman studying him intently. Those piercing eyes,

searching his face for any indication that *he* knows what the tag means.

He exhales sharply, something between a cough and a gut-punch wheeze, and flings the necklace back at her. Matilda catches it, eyes never leaving James.

“So, what now, James? We going to fight, or hug this one out, or what?”

James gets to his feet and starts collecting his things.

“Like you said, I get payment once the job is done, and before we figure out whoever *you* are, we need to take care of something first.”

Another captivating smile forms on Matilda’s face.

“Oh yeah?”

With his pistol now back in its holster, James tests the smoothness of the draw.

“Those slavers aren’t going to kill themselves.”

The Scry’s smile reaches from ear to ear.

Chapter 3: “Traffic”

The early morning light reveals a strange pair of traveling companions. The Scry, Matilda, confidently leads the way down a dirt road. The Taciturn, James, walks solemnly behind her. Hours earlier, James had entered Homestead with the express intention of ending this creature. He now finds himself in her employ.

As they set out for the slavers’ camp, Taciturn struggles to jigsaw all of the details together. They resist.

First, there’s the true nature of the Homestead Contract. Nothing good ever comes out of Babylon. Next is the Scry. In addition to the woman’s peculiar personality, James finds her fixation on eliminating the slavers bizarre in the best light. How can a person, a *creature*, that systematically kills in order to live have any moral stance at all? Add to all of that, the Scry’s amnesia.

And finally, looming over everything else, the Fall Water Lake connection – a wellspring of too many memories from the past life of one James Reynolds.

James methodically puts one foot in front of the other while he tries to process all the details, until a muffled voice finally makes its way into his immediate awareness.

Realizing Matilda is speaking to him, or at least trying to, James brings his attention back to the road before them and the business at hand.

“So… I’m getting the feeling you don’t like to chat much.”

James offers a single grunt in response.

Matilda turns around to face him but continues walking backwards.

“No, that’s cool. That’s cool. I get it. You’re committed to this whole ‘strong, silent type.’ Makes sense. You mercenary guys weren’t really creative when you called yourselves *Taciturns*. I can just image how *that* meeting went. All of you standing around with your stern faces, trying to see who could come up with the most serious name…”

James looks past the young woman.

“Was there something you wanted?”

A childlike smile appears on Matilda’s face. It’s a sight James is becoming more familiar with.

“I mean, a better word was right in front of you the whole time. *Ronin*. Right? I mean, *duh*. Wandering, masterless Samurai. You guys really goofed on that one. ‘Ronin’ would have been a much better name.”

James sighs and unclips the canteen attached to his belt. He looks at his indexation watch’s relentless countdown.

“Yes, the wandering is a part of it. To avoid indexation, all Taciturns need to be nomadic. But the name is there as a reminder to be detached from our work. It helps keep our memories intact.”

The smile fades from Matilda’s face and sudden seriousness takes over.

“What do you mean ‘keep memories intact?’”

James notes her sensitivity to the subject of memories. Considering her current circumstance, he supposes it makes sense.

“Everyone has finite memory storage, and when a person is indexed, part of their storage is filled with information from the Locale they’re added to. Taciturns avoid indexation by ‘wandering.’ But everything we do fills up space. Run out of space, and new memories replace older ones. So we stick to routines. Limit our interactions with others in the Cyberside. We’re reserved because we don’t want to fill up space. Behind the ‘stern faces’ are memories we don’t want to lose.”

Matilda stops abruptly, forcing Taciturn to halt as well.

“Well… what are the memories you’re holding onto?”

James pushes past the Scry and keeps his attention on the road.

“Look, I appreciate the small talk, but we need to keep moving. If what you’re saying is true, it will take us a while to get there, and I’m already concerned about how much time I’ve wasted here. Just… just give me a moment to think.”

The Scry catches up to James and walks besides him.

“Think about what?”

James glances over at her.

“Transportation. I know you don’t have to worry about Indexation, but if this plan goes belly up, I’m stuck in Homestead.”

Matilda nods and looks around at the desolate landscape surrounding them.

“Sure, sure. Good point. What are you thinking?”

Taciturn takes another pull from the canteen and surveys the rolling hills.

“I don’t know. Most of the communication nodes in this section have been turned off by the System, and I didn’t really see much on my way into Locale 24-6.”

Matilda snaps her fingers.

“I got it! Let me check some of the data I absorbed. There’s gotta be something from those Hunters that came after me. Maybe something useful.”

James feels his hand opening and closing again.

“I’m not sure that’s…”

Matilda cuts him off.

“Don’t sweat it, Gramps. This shouldn’t take long.”

Before James can interject, a strange glow appears in Matilda's eyes – an indication that the Scry is accessing information from some previously-absorbed target. Over the course of their conversations thus far, James had briefly forgotten what he was talking to.

James waits as she peruses data only she can see, awkwardly shifting his weight from one booted foot to the other. Thirty seconds feels like an eternity, and he begins to feel the warmth of the rising sun. Finally, Matilda blinks, her eyes clear, and she refocuses on the world around her.

"I didn't find much. Only a couple of old wagon stations and some rundown farms."

Taciturn places the cap back on his canteen.

"Wait, go back. Did you say 'wagon stations'?"

Matilda tilts her head and furrows her brow.

"Yes, but they didn't look operational or anything."

James waves his hand.

"Yeah, no. I wouldn't expect them to be working. How close are we to one?"

Matilda looks at him oddly, but points over a mound a short distance off the main road.

"Uhm, just a mile over there. But are you going to explain to me what… Oh, and you're walking."

Taciturn briskly heads in the direction of the hill. With each step, he can sense his Indexation watch counting down.

"The wagons will all be gone, but if we're lucky, there might still be horses programmed nearby."

He can hear the Scry running to catch up.

"Horses? What do you mean, horses?"

James shifts the weight of his backpack.

"Horses. You know, quadrupedal mammals with long faces. What do you mean, 'what do you mean, horses'?"

Matilda shakes her head, waving his question away.

"No, I mean why would there still be horses, after the System shut down the Wagon network? If the System implemented updates to the transportation grid, it doesn't make sense to keep those around, does it?"

James continues diverting from the main road, willing to take the risk.

"In the early days, horses were always kinda used as a back-channel, for engineers to travel while working on areas that were undergoing maintenance. I'm pretty sure the System doesn't have the right permissions to remove them entirely."

James notes the strange look Matilda gives him, but is thankful

she doesn't ask any more questions. They continue in silence until they reach the wagon station. After a quick search finds it abandoned, the two stand in the crumbling courtyard. Matilda kicks over a decaying wooden post in frustration.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, James. I don't see any horses here. I hope you have a backup plan."

Taciturn frowns–partly at her tone, partly at her use of his name – but doesn't press the issue. Instead, he activates his backpack's inventory, navigating menus and folders until he finds an item long stashed away. Recalling it, James retrieves a simple, nondescript whistle. At the sight of it, Matilda steps forward.

"What the hell is that?"

He cracks his back, rolls his shoulders, and allows himself a slight smile.

"The right tool for the right job. It's been a while since I've needed to use this, but if horses are nearby, this should bring them."

He turns to Matilda.

"You, uh, might want to cover your ears."

He raises the whistle to his lips and a loud, piercing shriek splits the still valley air. Matilda winces and jams her palms over her ears, uselessly after the fact.

"What the *crap,* dude? We want them to come to us, not run away!"

Taciturn chuckles, stuffing the whistle back into his bag. "I have a good feeling about this, for once." He leans against one of the chipped pillars, which creaks under the weight. "Trust me. We won't have to wait long."

Rubbing her ears simply to make the point, Matilda joins him. The stillness holds for a minute before Matilda finally asks, "So, uh, you're saying that whistle thing was used by Engineers in the early stages of the Cyberside, huh?"

James nods, scanning the horizon. Matilda inches closer to him.

"So… how did *you* get one?"

Taciturn has no interest in encouraging this line of questioning. Instinctively, he cuts the exchange before it can start.

"I understand we're going to be working together, but I'm not comfortable telling things about myself to a Scry."

It comes out worse than he intended, and as the offending word leaves his lips, Matilda visibly recoils. Closing his eyes, Taciturn is surprised at the slight tinge of regret he feels.

"*But.* I appreciate the curiosity. Let's just say that I know things about the Cyberside for a reason, and I'll use that knowledge to get us wherever we need to go in one piece. Think of it as a bonus employee skill set."

Matilda is clearly unimpressed with his attempts at backpedaling – but before she can respond, their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of three horses. The animals emerge from behind a service building and casually trot into the courtyard. Thankful for the distraction, James grabs his bag and approaches the nearest of the creatures. Its chestnut hair is rough to the touch, and James pats the animal slowly.

"See, I told you…"

Matilda has already approached the two other horses. A white stallion trots forward to Matilda. The other, a black mare, waits nearby, its dark hair gleaming in the morning sunlight. James holds his breath as Matilda approaches the two creatures. The stallion stomps closer but the mare waits anxiously at the courtyard's edge. Looking back out at the grassland, it seems ready to gallop away.

Slowly, step by step, Matilda makes her careful way past the stallion. Transfixed on the female, the Scry mutters words of comfort.

"Easy, girl. You're okay. You don't have to worry. I'll take good care of you."

Matilda continues toward the black horse, and it snorts anxiously. Extending a hand, Matilda finally touches the creature's black coat. The mare immediately stops. Suddenly calm, the horse nuzzles Matilda's shoulder with its nose. Turning around, the Scry smiles brightly at her traveling companion.

"She's amazing!"

Unsure of what he has just witnessed, he mutters a quiet, "Yeah. She sure is."

After securing his gear, James mounts his own horse. Together, they make their way back to the main road and resume their hunt for the slavers.

#

Content with the travel time saved by riding on horseback, James suggests a break from riding. They rest at the first farm they encounter, seeking shelter from the midday heat. Like the wagon station, the ranch house is completely deserted and in disrepair. As James gathers water from a well, he wonders if this is the handiwork of the slavers they're currently hunting.

After pouring the water into a trough, James joins Matilda in the shade of the house's porch. Sitting down, he pulls out an energy bar and starts unwrapping it. Without looking, he can sense Matilda eyeing the bar eagerly. He no sooner extends the snack to the Scry than it is snatched from his grasp. He unpacks another bar, and the

two chew in silence, watching the horses greedily lap up water from the trough.

Finished with his bar, James lights a cigarette. As the smoke rises in the afternoon air, Matilda points at the two animals.

"So, explain this to me. Why do you have to keep them alive? You said yourself that they were just used by Engineers as transportation. What's the point of eating? Like, aren't we *all* just, zeros and ones on a server?"

Taciturn stretches his legs.

"Sure, and those servers are located in secure facilities deep underground. Thankfully, they're far away from the destruction on the surface, but they still need to be maintained. They're run by automated drones that follow rules and routines in order to keep the hardware running efficiently. Without the drones' coding in place, everything would break down. Likewise, the System has established rules in order to keep the Cyberside running. I don't know, maybe eating has something to do with how our consciousness works. As humans, if we don't go through certain motions, we can't cope with this world not actually being physical. Regardless, it's a rule the System was designed to follow."

Matilda continues to watch the animals.

"That's kind of a 'fuck off' answer. 'It's that way because that's the way it is?' If everything has to follow rules, there shouldn't be things like slavers, but there are. The System should do something to stop it."

James draws deeply on the cigarette, reflecting on what the Scry girl has said.

"Sometimes when rules are established, people can find ways around them. Ultimately, what the slavers are doing is adjusting the rules of traffic for their own gain."

Matilda throws a rock into a nearby field.

"What the hell is *traffic*?"

James takes another drag and exhales a reflective plume of smoke.

"All those 'zeros and ones' are the code of unique personalities. As data sources, every person sends constant requests and demands to the System. That's called 'traffic'. The more traffic that's generated by a region, the more the System allocates priorities and resources to meet the demand. So, high traffic volume essentially means a bigger budget for the entities overseeing it. More budget means more influence."

Matilda crumples the energy bar wrapper in her hand.

"So, you're saying the more traffic you control, the wealthier you are. So, someone at the top is probably organizing all of this."

He makes a note of how quickly she processes information.

"Yeah, but there's more to it. If a location has too few active users

on it, the System can forcibly relocate the inhabitants and shut down the underperforming Location, to optimize energy consumption"

She cracks her neck and looks at him.

"You're describing a structure that just rewards you for having the most people, *and* if its ruler steals from somebody else, they can potentially shut down a rival. Who's the idiot that came up with this great idea?"

Taciturn holds his hands up, palms outward.

"Now, hold on a minute. The process was created to furnish Locales that promoted the well-being of their inhabitants. Administrators that governed justly would attract more followers and resources. That was the idea, anyway."

The look on her face tells him that there's no point in arguing original good intentions. A moment later, it occurs to him that she may have just goaded him into revealing that much more about himself.

"But… when those in power realized what was at stake, it led to a situation known as the First Traffic Wars. A conflict that had a domino effect on the Cyberside."

Matilda fidgets with the energy bar wrapper.

"Like indexation."

Taciturn nods.

"It's a tool to keep people restricted to an area and preserve a locale's powerbase. The acquisition, flow, and control of users has become an extremely profitable, ruthless business."

Matilda rips the wrapper apart.

"So who do you think these slavers work for?"

Taciturn rubs the back of his neck.

"Well, in the beginning there were a bunch of organizations. But as the Traffic Wars continued, it boiled down to handful of power players. On the East Coast, almost everything flows through Metropolis. Out here, Babylon dominates everything. The two are constantly trafficking people within their own protectorates and fighting each other for resources."

Matilda considers this before asking her next question.

"So, wait – if indexing locks you to a region, how does 'stealing someone' even work?"

James flicks his cigarette into the dirt and reaches for his canteen.

"Since indexing is a cheat introduced into the System, there are ways to dodge it. They just tend to be problematic for the people involved."

James drinks from his canteen. Matilda throws a rock out into the grass.

"There's something missing here. What do they do, once they take

you?"

James wipes his lips.

"That's one of the more unpleasant parts. Each person enters the Cyberside with his or her own stack of personal memories – but remember, storage is finite. So, indexation rules began exploiting the fact that older memories are set to delete. Most traffic slaves' memory allotment is drastically cut. You're left with just enough to ensure you make requests for services, but remember nothing of your previous life – whether that means in the Cyberside or the real world."

Matilda makes a spitting sound.

"So you get indexed, they cut your memory, and you become a mindless sheep that doesn't remember anything of your own past."

When she speaks again, she does not sound contemptuous or indignant. Only concerned.

"Do you think that has something to do with my memory loss?"

The horses, well-watered by this point, meander around the abandoned estate. James contemplates how best to respond.

"To be honest, I don't think so. But I'm not sure."

James waits for the next question, but it never comes. The young woman remains silent next to him. The restlessness of the horses gives him an out from the awkwardness.

"Maybe we should hit the road again."

Matilda silently nods and moves in the direction of the well.

Back on the trail, James occasionally glances over at the Scry. Matilda. She catches him looking and grins, but all Taciturn can muster in response is a brief nod. His focus is on the small dog tag resting around her neck – a bizarre clue not only to her past, but also his own.

From a time and place long before this world, when he still had a family.

James continues on the path as the rhythmic clopping of hooves pulls his mind into the past.

#

The team is stuck in yet another crunch, every department mired in another interminable attempt to correct poor planning by throwing countless work hours at a project. Keeping the company afloat in the relentless world of development means constantly working to satisfy the impulses of a demandingly fastidious customer base.

"Oh, shit. James," says the anxious man next to him. "Look – we have a new bug report!"

The man is in his mid-thirties, his pit-stained button-up shirt,

disheveled hair and bloodshot eyes all hallmarks of someone caught in the perpetually-grinding wheels of digital development. His name is Stephen, and he is the project manager – a man constantly fearful that they're behind schedule or out of time entirely. There are just too many bugs that need fixing – repercussions of a QA team flailing wildly in the throes of their relentless work cycle. Everything and everyone is gearing up for the impending stress test of the servers. All while, the upper management rages and fumes over unmet deadlines and the dire consequences of paying out too much overtime.

James looks beyond his panicked co-worker at an equally-panicked producer running past their room, the sustained stream of profanity issuing from his mouth matched only by the steady flow of energy drink being incessantly poured into it. It is common office knowledge that James regards this man, Scott, as a boisterous, top-tier asshole – but at least Scott can fully comprehend their situation, even with seemingly everything "royally F-ing him" in the same regularly-referenced orifice. Marketing has been mercilessly hammering the poor bastard for months to get the product out on schedule. With the ad campaign already in full media-saturation mode, it is clearly *not* going to be Marketing's fault if "massive amounts of revenue are lost."

Stealing a glance at his watch, James reads 02:45 – and he hangs his head in defeat. Sarah and Tim have already long given up and gone to bed disappointed. But with the overtime he is pulling down, not to mention the miscellaneous incentives for hitting the scheduled launch, what else can he do but grit his teeth and tough it out? At least, that's the line his supervisors are constantly feeding him. Even without their inimitable brand of passive-aggressive managerial oversight, James knows well enough the importance and value of what he is doing.

This new project is unlike anything he's ever worked on before. It's a motherfucking revolution.

James rubs his eyes. Lovely – Scott's colorful vocabulary is rubbing off on him. James stares at his screen, scanning and analyzing the lines of code. Still, this *is* a revolution. He can't stop contemplating it: The transferal of one's mind – one's very emulated awareness – into a network. It's life-changing.

And it will make James' family insanely rich.

James, sitting comfortably upright in this reverie, slowly becomes aware that Stephen is attempting to get his attention.

"Hey, James – there's still more on the way, buddy. I'll start cross-referencing them on the tracker." Weary determination seems to prod him. "And I'll make another pot of coffee."

James watches as Stephen doggedly strikes out for the break room. Rubbing his eyes again, James assumes a practical, crunch-

ready slouch and returns his attention to the screen before him.

"Damn, how many focus groups are involved with this?"

Fingertips poised at his keyboard, he mutters "I'll be able to spend more time with the family once we launch."

A life of relaxation and comforts to come fills his mind. Refocused, he presses Enter and resumes his quick and confident keystrokes.

#

"What are you thinking, James? *James.*"

Taciturn snaps back to the Cyberside reality around him with a jolt. He doesn't know what this memory-bleeding is all about, but he does know it certainly isn't good. When this is all done, he'll run a thorough system-check.

Matilda rides besides him on the dusty road. Looking at her, James considers her current appearance. Is this who Matilda truly is, or is this someone she's previously consumed? Is it the form she thinks he'll be most receptive to?

"The past," he finally answers.

Matilda purses her lips but doesn't push. Thankfully, most have enough common sense not to pry into a Taciturn's past – even those with no memories at all, so it would seem.

James wants to ask her about her past, as much as she can remember – her past deeds, her current abilities, and just what it is she's after – but he pushes the impulse away. She's still a Scry, and opening up to a Scry has never led to anything but an untimely demise.

They haven't thus far encountered anyone else on the winding, wheel-rutted road, and James would prefer to avoid attention. Out of the corner of his eye, he steals another glance at the Scry. Somehow, this young woman has managed to singlehandedly disrupt a trafficking operation near Homestead *and* eliminate the hardened killers sent after her. Clearly, she knows how to handle herself, and has more than enough call for revenge. James reflectively rests his hand on the butt of his weapon. He has no qualms about killing slavers himself. Their barbarous exploitation of the System's errors only creates new ones. As an engineer, he finds errors both professionally and personally repellant – all the more so if they're the kind of errors that bring actual harm.

Matilda starts humming a melody in the still, warm air that is nearly as tuneless as the uneasiness creeping into his thoughts. If what she says is true, the loss of a few low-level traffic operators hardly

warrants the credits spent trying to eliminate her. Pondering the number of hunters she has consumed leaves a cold void in his gut. Their skills now belong to her.

When Matilda reins in her steed, Taciturn quickly does the same.

"What's wrong?"

Matilda slowly slides off her horse and strokes the animal's sleek black fur.

"We're close. It's better if we continue on foot."

She gestures toward and beyond the hilly landscape ahead.

"The processing camp should be right over there."

Chapter 4: “Slavers”

Leaving the horses tethered to a scrawny sapling to graze, Taciturn and Matilda carefully crawl their way up a crest overlooking the slavers’ encampment. With each cautious, elbowing push forward, James senses his indexation watch continuing its silent countdown. He pauses to pull up his map. As a display of the surrounding area manifests above his watch, James judges the distance to the bordering Locale. He’ll be cutting it close. They’ll need to take out this band of slavers and be quick about it.

Prone at the top of the rise, James pulls out his binoculars and scans the area below. Armed guards patrol the outpost, and it doesn’t take long to deduce where the captives are being held. Sentries protect the gate to a chain-linked barrier that partitions the holding-pens from the rest of the camp. James surveys the ramshackle sprawl of the outpost and marks the location of the slavers. He notices a separate squad of soldiers guarding a wooden platform at the encampment’s center that supports a hulking, asymmetrical apparatus. Zooming in, James recognizes the equipment.

“Bastards.”

It’s a crude re-indexation mechanism known in the Cyberside as a brainshredder – a machine designed exclusively for the purpose of completely eradicating a victim’s memories and essential information. What remains is little more than an ambulatory husk, a receptacle ready to be filled with whatever task mandates are desired. Taciturn finds himself clenching his teeth.

A sudden commotion pulls James’ attention back to the holding paddock. A handful of slavers are charge-prodding an elderly captive out of the pen. The man’s ragged flannel shirt and torn, soiled jeans alone bear witness to the probable duration of his captivity.

Once outside the holding area, other guards shove, batter and shock the prisoner toward the brainshredder. The old man screams and twists, but his attempts at escape are as futile as they are painful to witness. A vicious rifle-butt to the back of his skull ends any further attempts at resistance.

The captive only begins to regain his senses as his captors strap the rusty, helmet-like device onto his head. His screams, curses, and cries for mercy go unheeded. The man weakly sobs as the last strap is tightened around his chin. A nearby slaver slams the brainshredder’s facemask shut and gives a thumb up to someone outside James’ view. Within moments, the old man’s body thrashes as thin, blinding bursts of violet lightning arc from and around the device. James is thankful that he’s too distant to catch the scorching reek of seared flesh and

ozone.

It takes only a few seconds to complete the gruesome process, to irretrievably delete a lifetime's worth of memories. When the helmet is removed, the tear streaks remain but a subservient emptiness lies beneath the man's glazed eyes. The mortal husk is pulled from the chair. James zooms out but continues to track the slavers' movements to the other side of the platform. Several slavers drag their docile, silent prisoner towards a gateway-like aperture and an awaiting technician. The technician makes a few adjustments on the command console, and a transportation portal flickers to life within the gateway. What remains of the old man is shoved through and vanishes instantly.

James does not need to see the rest to know the fate of the old man. After being transported through a series of locations, the new slave will be treated as merchandise – one of many marginally sentient drones used to maintain traffic levels in some other, far-flung quarter of the Cyberside. As he gradually reacquires his faculties, he will be taught when and how to make low-level requests of the System, and to perform a routine checklist of menial tasks. For this, he will receive food and credits. If he deemed to be "premium" stock, he will be groomed for the purposes of a higher clientele, or perhaps registered for the global entertainment services.

Taciturn puts down the binoculars and turns to Matilda. He is already formulating a plan of attack – but stops when he notices the dangerous glow around the Scry's eyes. Dropping her pack, Matilda unbuttons her jacket and repositions her large arsenal of knives.

James doesn't need to individually scan the blades to know they hold power. Imbued with deadly viruses, such weapons are doubtless designed to cut off access links between a potential victim and the System. As a Taciturn, he's seen similar blades in the hands of ruthless killers – but he has never seen such an array in the hands of a single user. Task-specific and lethal, these weapons can only be the implements of a seasoned specialist – or a high-functioning psychopath. They require a master's skill to be wielded effectively, and can lead to an incredibly fast death – or an excruciatingly long one.

Matilda rolls her shoulders and cracks her neck with a cold determination. Following suit, Taciturn loosens his arms and pulls his gun from its holster. He checks the revolver's cylinders and sees the same exotic, high-velocity rounds he'd intended to use on the Scry, secure and gleaming in their oiled chambers. James wrote the code for these bullets himself and has been prudent enough to leave caches of them stashed throughout the Cyberside. Each bullet is a nasty cocktail of malicious intrusion and corruption routines, expressly designed to

penetrate the defenses of even the toughest hostiles with a simple yet caustic virus. Upon impact, it spams a target's defenses until it bores through and switches off the target's mind. A quick and quiet death – in stark contrast to that offered by his companion's arsenal.

Content with his weapon's condition and ready to formulate a plan with Matilda, he looks up – and is struck momentarily speechless. The Scry is already making her way down the slope, on a blatant, straight-line bearing for the slave camp.

"Dammit, you've got to be *kidding* me—"

Hurriedly holstering his weapon, James lunges after her – but she is already setting foot on the camp's perimeter before he can cover even half the distance. Even factoring in his best estimate of her potential Scry skills doesn't offset the fact that she has just put both of their lives in danger.

Twenty paces short of the camp's reinforced gate, the Scry brazenly approaches a squad of sentries. They are so taken aback by her casual demeanor that she has closed to within six paces before even one of them thinks to start unshouldering his weapon, a shabby-looking field carbine.

Still trying to close the gap between them, James clearly hears Matilda say, "'Sup, dudes?"

To his credit, the sentry with the shabby-looking carbine does manage to raise one hand in an authoritative, palm-outward halt gesture. It doesn't do a thing to stop the first of Matilda's blades from opening his throat in a spray of blood and data. Even as he dies, his expression looks more bewildered than frightened – and in the next moment he keels over. Matilda has surgically opened up a second member of the now-shouting patrol before James finally clears his holster.

"*Shit* she's fast," James mutters as he opens fire and advances steadily, gunning down targets as he marks them.

Confident now that Matilda can efficiently dispatch those threats closest at hand, Taciturn begins picking off the rattled, yelling reinforcements who are only just now starting to rally their forces.

In his peripheral combat-vision, Taciturn registers knives eagerly slicing into necks and bloodied, jacketed bodies thudding lifelessly to the hard-packed dirt. Taciturn picks off a rifleman trying vainly to get a bead on Matilda without harming his comrades. He puts a round through the wrist, and then neck, of a gate watchman trying to fumble some sort of radio to his lips. Taciturn's bullets tear into chests, and data-blood mixes with dirt. The camp's defenders barely comprehend what's happening as more of their numbers fall to the ground. Nearly half of the encampment is down before the slavers seem to grasp that things are going badly for them. Their return fire is sporadic and

poorly-aimed. Armed with archaic, standard rifles, these fighters pose little threat to a Taciturn and a Scry.

James activates a combat protocol which populates the immediate battleground with data. Before a bullet leaves the barrel of an enemy rifle, James sees its intended trajectory, his myriad defensive/cover options, and his potential retreats if needed. The number of cartridges left in magazines is superimposed over each hostile. Surveying the battlefield, James is confident. There are not enough combatants remaining to pose a threat.

A blur moves past Taciturn. Like a berserker, Matilda charges toward her next target. Refusing to evaluate the battlefield, the Scry uses sheer speed to run her prey to ground – her foes never stand a chance. Three steps forward, a combat roll, a quick push off the ground, and her knife slips into the small of a slaver's back. James watches an irregular, cruel, and horrifying melee unfold before him. It's clearly the fusion of multiple bounty hunters' skills with her powers, and James is captivated by the gruesome sight of Matilda slicing her way through every slaver who finds himself within her reach.

A bullet whizzes past James' face and hits the decrepit seam-welded wall behind him with a loud, metallic *bang*. James staggers and drops to one knee as another round sends his hat flying.

"Fucking idiot."

Taciturn scrambles for cover. Scanning the bullet hole in the wall, he traces the trajectory back to a slaver hunched beside a rusting console on the main platform. He counts to three, rolls out from cover, finds his target and pulls the trigger. His would-be attacker tumbles lifelessly over the edge of the platform and falls out of Taciturn's line of sight. There is a thick, wet, unseen thud that sounds like equal parts blood and dirt.

As the dust settles, the quiet weeping of the surviving captives gradually replaces the clamor of the battle. Surveying the carnage, James spots the Scry by the platform. Matilda wipes sand and blood off her face and calls over to him.

"Give me a sec. I need to collect my knives."

Heading to the prisoner paddock, Taciturn breaks the lock on the gate and swings it open on its shrieking hinges.

"It's all right. We're not here to hurt you. You're all free to leave, but I just need a few questions answered. Did anyone overhear where they were planning on taking you?"

He knows his words are falling on traumatized ears. The captives cower in the farthest corner of the pen. James closes his eyes and reprimands himself. Leaving at least one or two the slavers alive enough to answer questions would probably have been the right

move. He looks around for Matilda.

"If we had just taken a moment to *think*—"

A bloodied, malnourished woman warily approaches him from the huddled group in the corner.

"Thank… thank you."

The Taciturn nods.

"Look, is there *anything* you overheard? *Anything* that could help?

Tears start to form in the woman's eyes. "After they…" she stops and looks at the ground. "They said I'd fetch a 'good price'… once I reached Babylon."

James reaches into his bag for a handful of rations and approaches the woman. Slowly extending his hands, James waits for the woman to accept the small offering of food.

"Did they say anywhere in particular? Anything a little more specific?"

The woman continues to look at the ground but reaches for the food.

"One of the them said this was their big break. They were just waiting for some contract to finish, and they'd be transferred back to Donovan's Tower."

Nodding his head, James mumbles, "Thank you."

Matilda approaches, wiping blood from a knife. Seemingly satisfied with its cleanliness, she sheaths the blade.

"So, is that where were going next?" pointing to the active portal on the platform. "Babylon, and this Tower?"

James shakes his head and steps away from the holding pen. The other prisoners, still huddled in the far corner, watch him warily.

"No. It's too dangerous to go there like this."

Picking up Taciturn's hat, Matilda wiggles her finger through the bullet hole.

"What could be so dangerous?"

James doesn't immediately answer. Babylon is a big place. The source could be from a myriad of potential threats, but there's one in particular that concerns him.

"Not a '*what*'…" James mutters.

Matilda rolls her eyes.

"*Ugh.* Okay. *Who?"*

James becomes aware of the humming from the transportation portal as he starts walking back to the platform.

"His name is Donovan Craze, and he's the ruler of Babylon".

Matilda steps over a body, tosses the hat aside, and follows the Taciturn.

"So, you know this guy."

The humming grows louder, filling James' head, vibrating the air.

The sensation causes his hand to start clenching and unclenching.

"I do… I did. We used to work together, back in the real world."

An unseemly excitement overcomes Matilda, and she springs forward.

"Oh, someone from your past. What's he like?"

The unpleasant humming and vibration both increase, and Taciturn feels the slightly-unsteady urge to sit down. He looks down at the ground and sees Matilda's reflection in a standing pool of data blood.

"Look, I'm going to go to work on the portal. It's our ticket out of here, but I… I need a minute. How about you go back and check on those people. See if they need water or something."

James doesn't look up, but he can see Matilda's concern in the reflection.

"Sure. If we don't need the horses, maybe they can ride them out of here."

Matilda starts to walk away, then turns around.

"Seriously, though – you all right?"

He looks up at her, digs for a package in one pocket, and pulls out a cigarette.

"I'm okay. Just need a minute."

The concerned look on Matilda's face slowly morphs into a sad smile.

"Okay, Gramps. I get it. Guess that was more exercise than you've had in a while."

Taciturn grunts but waits until Matilda goes away before sitting down. Desperately, James takes a drag from the cigarette and tries to put his mind back together.

Donovan. Donovan fucking Craze.

James exhales a long, slow plume of smoke.

"Just my luck…"

As the portal's buzzing continues, Taciturn closes his eyes. His mind wanders back. To a meeting that changed his life forever.

#

Yet another long night at the office, another dinner with the family missed. James waves to the security guards making their rounds of the nearly empty building. The red hue of the sky casts an otherworldly glow on his workstation. It's almost beautiful – save for the fact that the light outside would burn his eyes, were it not for the protective film on the windows.

Coffee cup in one hand, James finishes writing the code that will

integrate new functionality into what they have come to nickname "The Cyberside." He had planned to leave work 30 minutes early for a change, to beat the traffic home, but one last-minute request had led to another. And another. And here he remains.

Lost in thought, James is startled by the sound of his office door opening behind him.

Calm, expensive-sounding footsteps make their way to his desk. Without looking up, James knows who's intruded in his space – Donovan Craze, the head Marketing Director for the company, has just decided to drop by his office. Craze has an uncanny ability to exude an uncomfortable amount of hearty good cheer towards his co-workers, while also remaining the most razor-toothed shark in the business.

"James! First one in, last one out. Good man."

Turning around in his chair, James regards him. Fit, well-dressed, early forties.

"Mr. Craze, you're still here?"

Donovan moves to James' desk and starts rifling through the personal effects. He lifts up James' nameplate that reads CHIEF SOFTWARE ENGINEER.

"The Executive Corner has its own concerns. We're negotiating with the Asian partners. Time zones and all that. We're going to need them like hell for a project like this, buddy."

Donovan places the nameplate back on the desk and makes his way over to the window. Though his speech is perfect, James can smell the lingering alcohol on his breath. Donovan looks out the window at the city's skyline. The reddish tinge of the light compliments that of his own bloodshot eyes.

"You know… it's quite possible that when our boys in North Carolina finally crack this transference thing, humanity will actually have a chance."

Quiet instinct tells James to quash his first response to this. His second doesn't come out sounding much better.

"Look… Donovan, I've told you this before. All we're going to be able to do is let people interface with a system and interact with each other. You can enter the world and fool around all you want, but it isn't designed for long term use. It's just entertainment."

Donovan turns away from the window, regarding his Chief Software Engineer levelly. James presses on.

"Besides, the real focus for the last decade has been the space program to colonize—"

Donovan cuts him off.

"Don't be an idiot, James. I've always told people you're smart. Don't make me regret it."

Donovan steps over to James' side cabinet and helps himself to a brimming rock glass of whiskey.

"I've haven't been dick deep in the Washington scene for those assholes' senses of humor. The entire space program is a bust, and they all know it. They're just hawking that shit to buy as much time as they can, before everything changes."

Clenching his hands in his lap, James starts cycling through a whole series of possible responses, but once again stops himself. Over the years, James has learned not to engage Donovan when he's been drinking. At the end of the equation, Craze is still his superior. James reminds himself that being silent isn't technically supporting Donovan's claim. It's the path of least resistance.

Unchallenged, Donovan continues.

"This thing that we're building… it's a second chance. For Christ's sake, we won't even be able to walk around in sunlight soon. Mankind needs a new home, and it's sure as shit not in space."

Donavan points at James' computer.

"It's in *that."*

Unable to hold his tongue, James counters.

"With all due respect, a lot of people would disagree with you on that. Just the other day I read about a company out of Colorado that says they're working on bio-domes. Or that company out of Maryland, working on those underground vaults."

Despite Donovan's mocking laugh, James is determined not to relent.

"What about everyone with families? You're going to ask them to give up everything they *actually* have, for a virtual… *habitat?*"

Donovan's eyes and voice turn instantly cold. He gestures emphatically with the hand holding the glass, somehow not spilling a drop.

"Who said anything about *asking* them? We TELL people what they want, and they love us for it. People don't like making decisions, James. They *do* like being cool. We route hundreds of yottabytes of traffic on a daily basis. And each of their clicks in our direction is control and power. Power, James. So yes, we *will* make decisions for them, when the time comes."

These words run down James' spine like cold water. Part of him wonders just what sort of company he is working for. Another part of him wonders if Donovan will even remember having spoken these words.

With eerie alacrity, Donovan's scowl evaporates. He beams and claps a chummy hand on James' shoulder.

"Anyway, good talk, James. See you around, buddy."

Only after Donovan leaves the room does James remember to

breathe.

#

A kick to his boot jolts Taciturn back to his surroundings.

"Seriously, are you okay? Do you normally just space out like that after a fight? As your employer, that might be good information to know."

He gets to his feet without comment and moves toward the gateway platform. Pushing a body aside, James lights a cigarette and inspects the device. He smokes pensively, attempting to jigsaw this situation's insane pieces together –the slavers, Matilda, and Donovan. The answer eludes him. *Is Craze involved?* he wonders.

If so, why would he send assassins after Matilda?

James watches Matilda dead-check a slaver by casually giving the body a hefty kick. The body remains motionless. Spatters of data-blood and smears of dirt, marks of the slaughter he has witnessed, still cling to her jacket. James has dealt with Scry before – but Matilda is unlike anything he's ever encountered. He takes stock of the carnage around the platform, committing the wake of the bloodbath to memory.

Matilda's disarmingly-beaming smile appears as she rubs her hands together.

"So… we going to visit this guy or what?"

James leans down to access the portal controls and makes necessary adjustments.

Curiosity piqued, the Scry stands over him.

"So, what? You going to ramble on about some guy you used to know, and then go back to the creepy silent treatment? You going to tell me what we're doing next, or not?"

James spits the cigarette butt onto the bloodied dirt and continues tinkering with the portal's controls.

"We're going to need help with this. I think it's best if we go see a friend of mine first."

Matilda takes an exaggerated step backwards, palms extended before her.

"First, I see we're still keeping things in the 'vague as hell' column. Second, did you just admit that you actually have a friend?"

Closing the hatch to the maintenance panel, James stands up.

"The best friend any Taciturn ever had. A program."

James adjusts a final knob, and the portal comes back to life. James reviews the device's diagnostic screen and frowns.

"Pretty shitty connection out here, but it should hold up for a

bit."

Matilda claps her hands to her forehead.

"*Where*. The *hell.* Are we *going?"*

James gives her a slow grin.

"You ever been to Hawaii?"

Chapter 5: “Half-Humans”

Matilda gazes out the dirty window of the rattletrap empty Greyhound bus and lets out a dispirited sigh. She’s been stuck in this decrepit vehicle for almost eight hours. Evidently, the communication lanes out of the Wastelands are teeth-gnashingly slow, and she doesn’t care much for how the System has decided to manifest the transportation.

Outside the bus, she’s seen nothing but the dreary landscape that’s been procedurally generating for hours. As bored as she has ever been – that she can recall – Matilda turns to regard the mercenary. He rests quietly across the aisle. So far, her closest approach to diversion has been repeatedly asking “Are we there yet?” It raises some visible annoyance on the Taciturn’s part each time, but she has to admit, it’s a becoming a game of rapidly-diminishing returns.

She is about give him another one when the bus comes to an abrupt halt. At the front of the driverless cabin, the passenger door opens with a wheezing, hydraulic hiss.

James rouses himself, stands and collects his gear.

“Good. We’re here.”

Matilda looks at him, turns to press her face to the grimy window, and drinks in the exact same, boring yawnscape stretching infinitely in all directions. She turns back to regard him blankly.

“Um. What?”

Ignoring her, James moves up the aisle and exits the bus. Exhaling, Matilda shoulders her pack and trudges after him.

Stepping out of the vehicle, the Scry is engulfed in a strange, blinding light. When her vision finally returns, Matilda finds herself on a platform nestled on a dizzyingly-high coastal cliff. The brilliant sun shines down onto a crystal blue ocean below, surging with white-crested waves. It is a million times better than the dry heat and gory mess they left behind in the slave camp.

Matilda blinks in awestruck wonder at the panoramic beauty swelling and crashing on the rocks below her.

“This… this is Hawaii?”

Matilda shifts the weight of her pack and absently billows her shirt above her navel in a halfhearted attempt to cool herself off.

“Is it always this humid?”

“You’ll get used it,” James mutters.

Matilda starts to say something, and suddenly becomes aware of four statues near the platform. Even from a distance, something about their design feels sinister. James strides toward them without hesitation, but Matilda hangs back. Humanoid in design, the

sculptures tower twenty feet tall. Carved from some type of tropical wood, their grotesque, exaggerated faces are more monstrous in their mien than welcoming.

Taciturn abruptly motions for Matilda to stop, but her quick scan of the cliffside reveals only the mercenary and the tall, carved figures.

"What?" she asks.

The gunslinger slowly removes his pistol from its holster – and then places it gently on the grass.

"Just give me a moment. And *don't move."*

A sheen of sweat forms on Matilda's face. *Humidity,* she tells herself, but as Taciturn inches his way towards the statues, she feels her stomach start to tighten.

Matilda looks down, examining the grass at her feet. Scattered among the mostly-lush greenery, Matilda notices small patches of blackened grass and scorched blast marks at her feet. She raises her gaze to the mercenary, aware all at once of the numerous singe-marks and scores of charred dirt and burnt turf all around him.

Matilda opens her mouth to speak but stops when she sees the eyes on the statues begin to glow. The knife is in her hand, just under her clothing, before she is even conscious of the fact – but something tells her this is not a situation she can solve with steel. Reluctantly, she stashes the blade back inside her clothing. The statues are intently focused on *her*. She can feel it.

She can sense the power radiating from behind those eyes. She closes her own eyes to avoid their carved-rictus scrutiny.

Matilda can feel something forming in her throat. A warning, or a scream. She—

"Hey, come on. Stop fooling around."

Opening her eyes, Matilda spots James, standing well past the statues. He beckons her forward. Hesitantly, she runs to catch up, deliberately navigating around the blackened spots.

Up close, the towering, many-faced poles are even more frightening – larger than life. Gaping mouths reveal rough-sawn rows of jagged wooden teeth. Exaggerated, wide-eyed facial features make the statues appear more alien than human. Matilda realizes she has been holding her breath, and greedily takes in great lungfuls of air as she crosses into the clearing beyond, leaving the hideous sculptures behind.

She does not look back. "What the hell are those things?"

James tilts his head.

"They're the Guardians of the Ohana. The islands' defense system."

James gestures to the lush, tropical landscape around them.

"They protect the last bastion for half-humans, idealists, and

anyone else curious enough to merge their minds with the machine…"

"Um… even without freaking amnesia, everything you just said was total gibberish."

James stops and turns to face her.

"The Ohana is the network of islands separated from the main hub of the digital world. This isolated region is mostly populated by replicants – autonomous routines that have absorbed too many emotions and memories from human entities in the Cyberside."

Matilda pauses and considers the Taciturn. For a guy who supposedly likes to keep quiet, he sure has a habit of rambling on sometimes – especially when it comes to explaining how things work. At least, she reflects, most of what comes out of his mouth is interesting. She wonders how much of that can be chalked up to losing all your memories beyond the last three months or so. "How did some software absorb *emotions?"*

James clears his throat, a sign that he's preparing to pontificate. Matilda finds herself smiling. The Taciturn has probably kept quiet for a lot of his life. It must have been difficult.

"See, what happened is, when the System went online, it populated the Cyberside with a slew of AI bots – to make the whole transition easier, or at least that was the idea. The goal was to make this world feel alive, dynamic. They were called 'NPCs' – 'non-player characters'. It's all from the video-gaming roots of the System. Their functionality was focused on manufacturing and entertainment purposes. Primitive in their initial scope, NPCs were limited to very basic AI." For an instant, the expression on his face becomes unreadable. "But designed to look exactly like humans."

James resumes walking inland. Matilda follows, a pace behind him.

"So, they're not human."

She can't see James' face from behind. But she can hear the change in his voice.

"Not exactly… well… not at first. As time passed, their neural networks grew to understand – well, mimic – human emotions. The more they observed us, the better they became at simulating human behavior."

Matilda considers her time in Homestead.

"They looked like humans, but were different. So, let me guess. People didn't like them. If the replicants had to move here, I'm gonna guess that things didn't go so well for them in the rest of the Cyberside."

Taciturn points to a small structure ahead, but doesn't slow his pace.

"Well, you're not too far from the truth. After Humanity's mass

migration to the Cyberside, things began to change. Bots began to interact with people beyond the protocols of their initial coding. People settled into their new home, started sharing information with the NPCs around them. It didn't take long before somebody wanted to merge their code with a replicant. So they could…"

Matilda catches up, walking abreast of him.

"Could what?"

James tries to hide it, but Matilda can see his cheeks turning bright red.

"Uh… you know. They… erm."

Matilda wonders if all Taciturns are this strange.

Clearing his throat, James continues.

"Let's just say they became intimate. He gave some of his coding to her, and she became a little bit more human. It went beyond the physical. I mean – the engineer was effectively giving the machine a soul, if you will. Once the process was discovered, it wasn't long before others followed suit. More and more of the System's NPCs started feeling. Seeking knowledge outside their parameters. Questioning their directives."

As they near the structure, Matilda can see that it's some sort of kiosk next to a paved parking lot. The Taciturn continues explaining as they approach.

"People started calling them 'replicants' as a derogatory term. Conflict was inevitable."

Matilda's knowledge of engineering is limited, but she frowns at the statement just the same.

"As written programs, they shouldn't be able to attack their creators. How could there really be a 'conflict'? Wouldn't that be kind of—?" She makes a hammering gesture with her fist.

She notices James' own fist, clenching and unclenching – a funny thing he seems to be doing more and more often lately, possibly without realizing it.

"You're right. It *was* one-sided. Surviving replicants left humanity to its downward spiral. They rewrote part of the System's code and left with the few humans that were on their side – those smart enough to realize what was coming to the rest of the Cyberside. Together, the replicants and humans created a haven using the memories of those they had—" —he only hesitates a moment— "—interfaced with. The Ohana is a paradise off the grid from the major Locales, only accessible to those who have been granted access. They're extremely protective of their home, but they're still bound by the coding that prohibits them from harming humans. To get around the Asimov Laws the few humans that came with them actually built the defense system. It protects them from all unwanted outsiders."

Matilda looks back at the four statues in the distance. Reflects on the charred divots and scoring in the grass.

"Well, it's a good thing you had access."

James nods his head.

"Yes. Thankfully, Stephen made sure I can come and go as I please. I just had to convince them about you."

As they approach the kiosk, Matilda nibbles the inside of her cheek and wonders what the Taciturn had to say to 'convince' them. She doubts they have ever had any Scry visitors.

At the kiosk, Matilda watches as James pushes a few buttons on the display, cycling through car selections. She pounces on the mention of 'Stephen'.

"Okay, so this Stephen character. How exactly can your buddy help us? Is he like a warrior-monk or something? Are we here to train with the Master, who lives here in exile?"

One of the benefits of spending this much uninterrupted time with the Taciturn is learning how best to push his buttons. And he has a lot of buttons.

Sure enough, James turns around to stare at her. Matilda smiles and shrugs.

"What? I was hiding in an abandoned comic book store waiting for more of Donovan's goons to show up. Had to pass the time somehow."

Her smile widens as James shakes his head. She continues.

"I just don't understand why we can't go to this Babylon place right away."

Settling on a car choice, James pushes a button. In a nearby parking space, a convertible materializes out of the humid, breezy air. Matilda squints from the sun's reflection on the immaculate white paint. The roof automatically retracts as James approaches the vehicle. "This is bigger than just a bunch of slavers. Donovan basically controls Babylon, and charging head first into his fortress is a one-way ticket."

As she trails behind him, Matilda starts stabbing the air with her hands. "I don't know, that's always worked for me before."

Before opening the driver door, James gives Matilda a rare, genuine smile.

"Use only that which works, and take it from any place you can find it."

Matilda stops her imaginary attack and looks at James, "I don't get it."

Grabbing the handle, Taciturn says, "Never mind. Forgot who I was talking to."

As he slides into the driver's seat, Matilda jumps over the

passenger side door.

"Look, we're going to have to play this smart. We'll need a disguise to walk around Babylon, and the replicants make the best. That's why we're going to see Stephen. He's an old friend of mine, and he'll help us."

With the push of a button, the car rumbles to life. As they exit the parking lot, Matilda lets her hair down. James seems to know where he's going, taking them along a winding coastal road. The cool ocean breeze is refreshing.

"So, this friend of yours – you met him in the Cyberside?"

Matilda notices James' hand tighten on the steering wheel.

"No… it was long before all of this."

They continue to ride in silence. The island's beauty strikes her anew around every curve in the road. She imagines how pleasant life must be here. How different things would be if she had woken up here instead of Homestead.

Taciturn drives as stoically as ever. For a man about to visit an old friend, Matilda finds him rather grim. Turning her attention back to the ocean, Matilda can only guess what's going on inside the mercenary's head.

#

At lunch time, the Fall Water Lake cafeteria is like an ant colony. There are just too many people stuck in crunch, and frankly not enough time to waste eating. There was a time when everyone had his or her own schedules and eating practices until HR passive-aggressively reminded everyone that the one-hour lunch break was mandatory. Now, everyone rushes to waste their hour waiting in line. Just another example of HR's sterling good intentions. James suspects productivity has likely taken a huge hit, rather than seeing the increase which was presumably the point.

All James wants to do is to eat his food and get back to work as quickly as he can. That is, until he notices Stephen, his friend and project manager. Stephen waves his hand and motions for James to sit next to him.

"What's going on, buddy? What'd you grab from the line?"

James sits down to see Stephen's tray loaded with a variety of food and drink, all of the major Coding House food groups represented. Grease. Salt. Sugar. Caffeine.

"Oh, a sandwich huh? Me, I'm starving. Overslept after staying late last night. Only had time for coffee and cigarettes." Stephen laughs between bites, and with each laugh pieces of fried chicken fly

out of his full mouth. “But I’m preaching to the choir, aren’t I? I’m pretty sure you’ve replaced your blood with Red Bull, by this point.”

Grinning, James starts the arduous task of forcing nutrients back into his body. Undeterred by his silence, Stephen continues, “So how’s Sarah?”

“Good,” James lies as he starts to eat.

He hasn’t been on good terms with his wife since he started the most recent crunch cycle. Every argument eventually leads back to the point that he spends no time with his family.

Taking up the staff of comradely lunch break chitchat, James asks, “How’s Helen?”

“Great,” Stephen lies in return. Both know better than to push the issue. Though Stephen’s tone is upbeat, James can see the same exhaustion creeping in behind his friend’s eyes. He looks around the buzzing, chaotic lunchroom. Fall Water Lake doesn’t need to be reminded to take its lunch breaks. It’s consistently eating away at its employees. Breakfast, lunch or dinner, it never misses a meal.

Steven shovels a handful of fries into his mouth and asks James to pass the salt. “I’m not gonna lie, James.” – and suddenly the upbeat, optimistic mask is gone. “This whole thing is really starting to piss me off.”

James stops, mid-bite. This side of Stephen rarely comes out.

“This company, man. They think free lunch makes up for everything they do to us. I’ll gladly pay for plate of fucking chicken if it means I can go home at night. I swear to God, I’m this close to grabbing my family, leaving this whole shitty city, and…”

James sits in awkward silence and listens to his friend vocalize a feeling that everyone at the company has running through their heads on a daily basis. Visibly agitated, feeding on his own frustration, Stephen continues.

“…I was going to say, ‘get some fresh air’, but it’s not like there’s any *left.”* Steven looks down at his tray of foodlike substances. “Anyways, I gotta get my progress report to Scott by end of day. So just send me your projections when you get back.”

The friends spend the rest of their meal in silence.

Chapter 6: “Ohana”

Their trip up the coast proves beautiful, but uneventful. The Taciturn drives in silence, eyes ever focused on the horizon. In each town along their coastal route, Matilda expects a security team or an escort, but the inhabitants they encounter just smile and wave. The Island Guardians, she thinks, must be extremely effective to instill such trusting calm amongst the Ohana.

A bump in the road jostles the car and brings Matilda back to the subject at hand – their meeting with Stephen. This man – a friend from the pre-Cyberside days, or so the Taciturn claims – holds the key to them getting into Babylon undetected. At least, that’s what Matilda has been able to put together. Taciturn has, if nothing else, certainly been living up to his name since their arrival.

James finally slows and turns up a tree-lined access road towards a large porch-wrapped house that rests comfortably on the mountainside. At the driveway gate, James enters a password into the call box, and the iron-barred gates creak open. Matilda glances at the Taciturn. His face is unreadable as he takes the car up the gravel driveway.

Matilda spots a young man sitting on the porch, waving. While they are still out of earshot, Matilda quickly asks, “Is there anything in particular about this friend of yours I should know about?”

Before the Taciturn can respond, the man on the porch raises both hands and exclaims, “JAMES!”

From his clothing, the man doesn’t look like the warrior-monk Matilda had envisioned. With his brown open-toed leather sandals, blindingly-white shorts, and loudly-patterned tropical shirt, his entire ensemble screams Tourist.

Killing the engine and stepping out of the car, James returns the greeting with a wide grin. Standing at the passenger-side door, Matilda feigns an alarmed step backward.

“Hold up, was that a smile? You can actually *smile?”*

Ignoring her jab, James ardently shakes Stephen’s hand, each man clasping the other’s shoulder. “Security pinged me when you arrived. It’s been way too long.” He turns to Matilda, extending his hand. “And a pleasure to meet you as well. I’m Stephen.”

Intrigued, Matilda decides to test James’ friend. She hopes to gauge his personality and get back at Taciturn for being so closed lipped. She squares her shoulders, lowers her voice, fixes him with her eyes, and tries to keep a straight face.

“Greetings, Stephen. Pleasure to meet you, I’m sure. I am Matilda. James’ employer.”

This, she notes with pleasure, has the desired effect. The mercenary straightens and immediately starts to interject.

"Wait, now hold on a—"

Stephen's boisterous laugh tramples the rest of James' objection.

"Ha! Glad to see James finally bringing someone with a sense of humor!" He offers Matilda a wry look. "His Taciturn pals are a pretty stuffy bunch."

Chuckling, Stephen gestures to the house.

"I'm sure you guys must be tired. Let's catch up on the patio."

As Stephen turns toward the house to lead the way, Taciturn gives Matilda an annoyed look. She laughs.

"What? I just wanted to see if your friend is as grim as you are."

The house's backyard is a well-maintained, picturesque, tropical getaway in its own right. Overlooking the valley from its mild, grassy grade, Matilda can see the town and ocean vista spread out below them. As Stephen takes his place at a backyard table, a sliding glass door opens to reveal a young woman in a silk robe. She carries a tray of drinks and places it on the table. Smiling at James and Matilda, she settles comfortably in Stephen's lap.

"Hey, James. Great to see you. And…?"

Stephen chimes in, "Samantha darling, this is Matilda. James' boss."

Stephen winks at Matilda, and she hears Taciturn groan next to her. Matilda doesn't try to control her own laughter.

Grinning, Samantha extends her hand. "*Aloha,* Matilda. I really hope you enjoy your stay here."

With introductions out of the way, Stephen and James begin their rapid-fire game of social catch-up. Stephen regales them with several recent, unsuccessful attempts by outsiders to enter the territory, the approaching harvest festival, and his own plans to design new crops for the coming year. James, in turn, recalls his adventures as a Taciturn – the towns he's visited, the monsters he's slain. Swept up in the verve of their reunion, Samantha excitedly shares the news that the two of them want to have children. She and Stephen have talked about merging their information data and requesting the System to provide a wrapper in the form of a new information entity.

James congratulates them on their announcement, but Matilda notes the brief flexion of his right hand as he does it.

Matilda sips her drink and listens. She can't help but be struck by just how disparate these two men are, in both manner and appearance. Their respective lives in the Cyberside could hardly be in greater contrast – one of them rejecting it, at least partially, by give it to code, and the other quietly endeavoring to maintain his humanity seemingly with every other step taken in this new life.

The brilliant sun draws down toward the horizon, gradually bathing the backyard in deepening tropical reds and golds. Despite the cheerfulness of the reunion, Matilda begins to feel vaguely uneasy. Everything here is just a little *too* perfect. The notion fills her not with any sense of immediate, practical alarm, but rather a quiet, creeping fog of wariness. Her entire life has consisted almost entirely of either hunting or being hunted. At least, that goes for what little of her 'entire life' she can actually remember.

Matilda considers the state of her existence as the chatty reminiscing continues around the table.

Suddenly eager for a way into the conversation and out of her own head, Matilda blurts, "So, how did you two meet?"

Stephen looks affectionately into his partner's eyes. "I don't know. There's not much to tell, really. We met fairly early on after the Second Great Migration. She ran a storefront. As people started experimenting with broadening levels of communication with programs, it just felt like the natural thing to do. Best decision I ever made."

At these words, Samantha rests her head contentedly on Stephen' chest. After a brief silence, the conversation veers from the etiquette of casual catchup to the particulars of their arrival. Stephen leans back in his chair, his arms folded behind his head.

"So, James, as much as I would like to think you came to work on your tan…"

Pushing his plate away, James reaches for his pack of cigarettes. "How about you and I go for a walk, and let the ladies chat amongst themselves?"

Excusing himself from Samantha's side, Stephen leads James through the side yard to the front of the house, leaving the women to their own devices.

In the new silence, swept only by the rush of the gentle, warm breeze, Matilda looks at Samantha again and manufactures a genial, less-than-completely-easy smile.

"So… uh… you want to be a mother, huh?" Matilda hears herself asking, wincing inwardly.

Samantha beams. "Yes, I think both Stephen and I are ready at this point."

In the silence, Matilda clearly hears the tiny *chink* of melting ice cubes shifting in her glass. "Well, I guess, like, congratulations?"

Matilda closely scrutinizes the grainwork of the table. There had been little time to practice small talk in Homestead. She assumes the more visceral details of their slaver fight are off the table.

Matilda drinks more of her iced tea, trying to think. As a Scry, Matilda possess an unmatched ability to captivate others. But it's a

power she only taps into when in danger—

—as it inevitably leads to feeding.

She looks up, gazing across the backyard, out to the vast, impossibly-blue ocean stretching towards the horizon.

Not a single threat as far as she can see – except for herself.

Matilda makes a small, unladylike sound in her throat, scouring her mind for something to say. Something even halfway interesting.

"This… uh… must be a great place to be indexed, I guess."

Samantha smiles and shrugs, managing to make it look elegant. "Well, as replicants, we're not affected by that. For the few humans that are here in Ohana, we have no indexation rules."

Matilda looks past Samantha to the front of the house, to where she assumes the Taciturn is. Without indexation rules, James could remain here as long as anyone could want. And yet, for some reason that eludes Matilda, he chooses to roam the Cyberside.

Matilda returns her focus to Samantha, and finds her still smiling. All at once, she realizes what else has been bothering her, what she couldn't quite nail down until just this moment: Replicants try so hard to be humanlike, but they've chosen to simply mirror a particular aspect of humanity – that of the nurturer. From Matilda's own experience, 'humankind' is filled with cruelty, violence, and greed. Simply put, the replicants are genuinely too good to be human.

Matilda tries to extricate herself from this reflective quagmire.

"Do you have something else to snack on?"

Samantha pushes up from her chair with a wink. "Of course. Stephen has a pretty serious sweet tooth. I'll find us something."

Matilda slouches further into her chair. As she waits for Samantha, she frantically tries to form a list of small-talk questions. Nothing coherent presents itself by the time Samantha returns with two bowls of ice cream. Gracefully taking her seat, Samantha slowly begins spooning small mouthfuls of the dessert to her lips.

"There's an interesting thing Stephen once told me: Eyes are the gateway to the soul. It's a funny saying, I know," The replicant glances up from her dish to stare directly into Matilda's eyes. "but yours say *so* much about you, Matilda."

Matilda watches her, without comment or expression.

Samantha continues, "Mine… won't ever truly be like yours. No matter how much I try. I remain what I am. Code. But being able to create something with Stephen… wouldn't that make me just like…" she trails off and gazes out across the valley towards the ocean. Her eyes seem to water. "Your eyes, though. No one can take those away from you."

Matilda stabs at her ice cream but remains silent.

Samantha studies Matilda carefully, her eyes moving back and

forth. Abruptly, she stops, blinking "I'm sorry, Matilda. I shouldn't make you uncomfortable."

For a moment, the only sound between the two is the scrape of their spoons on the ice cream dishes. Matilda pokes her ice cream some more. She doesn't look up at the next words from Samantha's lips.

"So, Stephen said you're a Scry. That must be a very interesting life you have."

Clenching her jaw muscles, Matilda continues her methodical assault on the melting dessert. She mumbles, "Yeah, I'm sure there haven't been many around here." Matilda pushes the spoon down until it touches the bottom of the bowl.

Samantha's soft voice continues.

"No. I do believe you're the first of your kind ever to set foot in the Ohana. It's quite an honor to have you at our home."

Of the numerous words that Matilda might have been expecting, 'honor' is not among them.

"Don't you mean 'responsibility'? In my experience, most people don't really like having monsters around."

Samantha's smile fades slightly. Matilda clearly recognizes a sadness in the replicant's ostensibly-imperfect eyes.

"Darling, we all lived in the humans' world, once. That's why we had to create this place. We're all outcasts to them."

Matilda straightens, just slightly, out of her slouch and studies the face of the replicant. The young woman across from her. Perhaps the Scry has more in common with her host than she originally imagined.

Samantha clears her throat and pushes her plate away. "You want me to tell you the real story behind how Stephen and I met? He likes to leave out the really embarrassing stuff."

Matilda's voice is weak, but she gives an emphatic nod. "I'd like that very much."

As Samantha continues her story, Matilda takes a large, greedy bite of the ice cream. It tastes fantastic.

#

On the far side of the house, Taciturn pulls out a bent cigarette and lights it. Stephen sits in a wicker chair, filling his pipe with tobacco. "So, all bullshit aside – what's going on out there, James?"

With the cigarette in his mouth, James stretches and leans against a wooden pillar on the porch.

"Oh, you know. Everything's going to hell in a handbasket."

Stephen gives him a mild laugh.

"So, business as usual, then."

James taps off his ash. "Seriously, though. System laws are collapsing or being re-written one after another. It's a dumpster fire."

Stephen stokes his pipe, "It's always been that way."

James shakes his head, "No. This is different. Things are way out of control. I'm seeing stranger things than I've ever seen before."

Stephen lets his ring of smoke hit the porch ceiling before responding.

"You mean, like Taciturns going on adventures with Scrys? What were you *thinking,* bringing her here? I mean, sure, she seems nice and all – but do you have any idea what I had to pull, to get her access?"

James nods, his eyes closed. "Yeah, Stephen. I can't thank you enough. I know I sprang all of this on you without warning, but there's something strange about her. Different. I mean, don't get me wrong, she's *strange,* too… but I mean, *different.* She claims she can't remember anything beyond the last three months. And Donovan's people are after her. Something just doesn't add up, and I'm starting to wonder if the others are involved, too."

Stephen remains silent while a cloud of smoke rises from his pipe. "Like I said, she seems nice enough. But do you really want to get involved with all of this? It sounds like you're trying to *open* Pandora's Box rather than close it."

James lights another cigarette. "Yeah, I hear you, but it shouldn't be that big of a deal. The two of us, we'll just go see Donovan. Get some answers out of him. One way or the other."

Stephen shakes his head. "It seems to me, buddy, that you and I have completely different understandings of what "not a big deal" means. You just need to ask yourself what you're really doing this for… and if it's worth it."

They smoke in silence, looking out across the valley.

Finished with his tobacco, Stephen pushes himself out of his chair with a groan. "Well… I know well enough that a visit from you usually means work for me. So, what do you need?"

James tosses his cigarette into a bucket at the foot of the porch steps. "The Scry is being hunted. As soon as we get into the Babylon Basin, we'll be flagged by every one of Donovan's thugs."

Stephen absently cleans his pipe. "So, you need a mask, sure. But Scry are difficult to disguise. They have a very specific profile signature, for those who know what to look for. And Donovan has some of the best trackers. All I can do is try. Your system, by the way, could also use a pretty substantial firmware update there, Taciturn."

James nods.

"Thanks, Stephen. You're the best."

Stephen nods right back. "Yeah. Sure. Let's save the praise until I

actually finish. I'm going to need some time to write her code and update yours. I'll need your module."

James takes off his watch and hands it over. "Seriously, Stephen – thanks. Do you need any help with it?"

Stephen turns the equipment in his hands without looking up.

"No, I'd better do it myself. Go relax. Take a load off. I get the feeling it's going to be a while before you get to again. There's some beer in the fridge."

James claps him on the shoulder. "That sounds perfect. I'll go make sure Matilda is squared away, then grab a drink." Stephen slaps James on the back in kind, before heading back into the house.

A few hours later, James sits in a rocking chair on the front porch. It's late, but the cold beer in his hands isn't going to drink itself. Nor would he want to deny it the same fate as its predecessors. James smiles, chuckles, and acknowledges that he is slightly drunk. He hears the clatter and hum of equipment in Stephen's workshop. James wants to go in there and resume their talk about old times – about the world before all this. He knows it would only distract Stephen from his work. James evaluates the remaining contents of his beer bottle and feels content staying right here with the steady, soothing creak and cant of the rocking chair, the carefully-finished porch, the warm rush of the tropical evening air.

Laughter from inside the house draws his sluggish gaze. For creatures that were created without emotions, replicants sure have learned how to love each other. *Love*. The thought persuades him to take another heavy pull from the bottle.

Stephen chose to open his mind to a replicant, and he seems happy enough for having done it. But that happiness has come at a price. Sure, he lives in a clean, peaceful part of the System, while Taciturn wanders the badlands.

"But some things you can never get back," he mutters to the night air.

He swirls the remaining beer around in the bottle and listens to the distant ocean. James is surprised at the replicants' struggle to create a new world for themselves. Humanity's attempt in the Cyberside isn't faring nearly as well as what the replicants have managed to build. But if everyone here is at least part-human, how long until this falls apart along with everything else?

James shakes his head. When this fails to clear any of the cloudiness, he resigns to drink more. James knows why he's with the Scry girl, and where he must go. The past has finally come back to challenge him. No matter how far he runs.

With the warm breeze gently conquering the last of his consciousness, James falls asleep in the rocking chair. This time,

however, he sees no dreams of the past.

He falls into a warm, welcoming darkness, his mind logging off for the night.

#

In the morning, the sun warms the valley, bringing vibrant color to every blossom, bush and blade of greenery. Matilda leans against the door, watching the Taciturn slumbering peacefully in the uncomfortable-looking rocking chair. The clink of plates in the kitchen draws her back inside. Stephen is almost finished with his work, Samantha is setting the table, and the aroma of rich, flavorful coffee fills the air. Despite her initial issues with this place, Matilda doesn't want to leave. The Ohana has a peacefulness to it that Matilda doubts she'll find anywhere else.

Matilda mulls over her conversation with Samantha – which, despite a rocky and awkward start, went on well into the night. She knows now just how much she can enjoy being drawn into a conversation with someone else. Let it engulf you. Watch the time pass. And now here she stands, watching James still asleep in a chair on the porch.

She is thankful that James brought her here and introduced her to his friends.

As if summoned, Stephen places a hand on her shoulder.

"Morning, Matilda."

She turns and sees a bleary-eyed, stubbled man exhausted from a long night of work.

"James asked me to make this for you. It should help conceal you, but he never told me what form the program should take. I chose this one for you. It just seemed to fit. Here you go."

He places a silver necklace with an exquisitely-crafted pendant in her hand. The pendant is in the shape of a key.

"Um… thanks, Steve."

Samantha calls from the kitchen.

"Breakfast is ready, you two. Someone needs to go wake the sleepyhead."

Stephen nods in James' direction. "Will you go wake him up?"

Matilda can't hide her surprise. "What? Why me?"

Stephen gives her a tired smile. "Because I smell bacon." With a wink, he makes his way towards the kitchen.

Matilda laughs as she heads to the front porch.

"Hey James, time to get up," But the rocking chair's occupant remains motionless. Unsure of what to do, she tries again. "Seriously

James. Rise and shine."

Finally, a swift, summary kick to the feet startles James out of his slumber. He frantically looks at the spot on his wrist where his watch should be, failing to find it, before he remembers where he is.

Already heading to the kitchen, Matilda calls back over her shoulder:

"Yo, get your ass up or miss out on bacon, Taciturn!"

After breakfast, Matilda and James say their goodbyes to Stephen and Samantha. Samantha declares what a travesty it is, that they have not even visited the beach, but a glumly-determined Taciturn makes clear their urgent need to hit the road.

As James drives them along the coastal road back to the data kiosk, Matilda can still hear the surge and crash of the nearby surf under the sound of the engine, the rush of the air around them. Part of her would like to stay just a bit longer, but deep down, she's eager to head to Babylon. If any of what Stephen said at breakfast is true, Matilda is ready.

When they arrive at the kiosk, James punches their destination into the terminal. Matilda takes in a deep breath of ocean air, letting it fill her lungs.

As she exhales, Matilda playfully stabs the air. James hasn't told her much about this Donovan character or his Babylonian Empire. She's still unclear why this guy is such a big deal.

The portal hums to life. Just a matter of time, now. And Matilda isn't sweating the details.

How seriously can she take a guy who lives in a place called 'Hollywood'?

Chapter 7: “Babylon”

The dinginess of the rundown train is accentuated by its musty odor. It’s been an uncomfortable trip, but James is thankful that Stephen’s masking software has held up so far. The late afternoon light shines through the window as the train makes its way into Downtown Babylon. In the distance, massive skyscrapers stand in stark, towering contrast to the street-level grunge and poverty of the outer regions. From time to time, James notices walls and storefronts tagged with anti-Donovan graffiti, although the defacements become less frequent the closer they get to the city’s heart.

Taciturn fights the urge to fidget under the unfamiliar weight of his new utility jacket. It pained him to discard his wanderer’s outfit, but his next urban destination requires far less conspicuous garb. He now wears faded jeans, a V-neck shirt, dirty tennis shoes, and a baseball cap. Matilda sits silently next to him. Her appearance has changed drastically since their first meeting in Homestead. Short, red hair now rests on Matilda’s shoulders. She wears a traveler’s raincoat, a white turtleneck, a black skirt, fishnet stockings, and military-style boots. Her worn rucksack sits under her seat.

A voice over the intercom announces their arrival at the Van Nuys station, and the train begins to slow down. Taciturn sinks deeper into his chair. With a final jolt, the locomotive comes to a stop and the passenger doors open with a hiss. James watches a variety of travel-weary denizens file out of the car, hurrying to get to their destinations unmolested. The same emptiness fills their eyes as they take measured, habitual strides in lockstep, each person completely encompassed in the mundane immediacy of their own world. Willingly or otherwise they all produce traffic for Donovan’s Empire.

Within moments, those waiting on the platform have shuffled aboard with equal apathy, and the train resumes its rhythmic, swaying journey. James shakes his head, filled with a mounting frustration he can barely articulate. For a species that emphatically vocalizes its desire for freedom, humanity is so eager to embrace its own enslavement – so desperate to escape a dying world – that it is willing to suffer a dismal re-creation like this. The Cyberside was designed for limitless possibilities – society’s wildest dreams made real.

Matilda’s touches his elbow, directing his attention to the front of the train car. Two men in Babylon Corporation uniforms walk down the aisle. They methodically stop beside each passenger and scan their identity programs. These patrols were instituted by Donovan with two purposes – to inspect his property, and to keep his populace in line. Cogs in a much larger machine, they mutually reinforce Donovan’s

stranglehold on the city.

The Scry tenses in her seat beside him, but James quickly places a hand on her arm to dispel any delusions of fighting. The smaller of the two guards brandishes a club, and James doubts he needs much of an excuse to use it. Eying Matilda in particular, the men move toward them.

"Hey, good looking – what are you doing with this loser? Don't recall seeing you on *my* train before."

He emphasizes *my* by poking the end of his baton into Taciturn's chest. Keeping his face free of any slightest trace of emotion, James looks up from under the bill of his cap.

"Then you've got a quite a memory there, friend. But I'd expect nothing less from a Company man. Forgive my associate if she's quiet. We're on a hunting trip."

James finishes his statement by granting the officer access to his newest disguise. The masking still presents itself as a Taciturn, but it doesn't flag him as James Reynolds.

Sneering, the officer opens the ID program. "We'll see about that."

James waits patiently, without comment. Stephen's disguise work is impeccable. When the officer inspecting the ID program pauses and frowns slightly. James fights back a smirk. Donovan goon or no, this man understands the foolishness of provoking a Taciturn. If one is sitting here on *his train* at all, it can only mean a larger monster is at hand.

Closing the ID program, the officer inquires, with a strain of newfound deference, "Uh. What exactly are you hunting?"

James leans in ever so slightly, lowering his voice into a confidential, just-between-us range.

"We've received word that a Puppeteer is loose in the city. We're tracking its scent."

The officer's eyes widen in horror.

"A Pp..pupp..*uteer?"*

The seats nearest James and Matilda empty almost before James is aware of the fact. Other commuters, likely already uncomfortable with the officers' mere presence in the first place, now have a legitimate excuse to make themselves scarce. Of all the creatures that haunt the Cyberside, Puppeteers are the most dangerous, the most instinctively loathed and feared . Left unchecked, Puppeteers systematically corrupt and devour entire communities with their monstrous, replicating viruses.

Having once infected a victim, the Puppeteer maintains control of the victim's body. All the while, the Puppeteer's mind is, in many respects, hardly beyond that of a child's. The creature infects those it

wants to play with – and when it tires of them, it devours them. That's the *best*-case scenario, James thinks blackly. All other outcomes are far worse.

And in a city as teeming with potential victims, as sprawling as Babylon—

James recoils from the memory of his own brush with one of these foul creatures. Unfortunately, the best way to catch a Puppeteer is with poisoned bait, bait implanted with a lethal counter-virus, a monster-killer. Like placating an ancient god with a virgin sacrifice.

The officer now looks at Matilda. Perhaps he has done some rudimentary, unpleasant math. "I… uh… see. Good luck, Taciturn." His partner, who looks equal parts stone-faced and deathly ill, has not uttered a word.

James is confident that the very moment their patrol ends, these men will find a thousand excuses to get home early and stay inside. The fewer Donovan-minions on the streets, the better.

Matilda looks around the car, shocked. "Seriously, everybody left?"

James nods, "People tend to do that when they're afraid."

Matilda mutters, "Well they fear *Donovan,* and still stick around. What's the difference between him and a Puppeteer?"

James gazes out the window at the approaching towers.

"When you put it like that, nothing."

#

At Union Station, Taciturn and Matilda exit the train and join the flow of the departing crowd. Outside, the weary, setting sun does its best to break through the thick layer of smog. The cries of trinket-hawkers, stall-vendors and store owners compete with the constant, amplified bombardment of ads, transit-connection announcements and Babylonian propaganda.

Moving along with the surging crowd, James feels a growing knot of anxiety binding his thoughts. His years as a Taciturn have done nothing to endear him to crowds. Monsters of the Cyberside can hide in plain sight. He finds his sights continually switching to and from potential targets, fixing on free hands, on bulges in bulky clothing, on backpacks, on strollers, on every momentary glance in his direction. With this many people, every movement can herald, or hide, a threat.

Overwhelmed, he clutches Matilda's arm and pushes perpendicularly through the stream of bodies. Matilda cries out, startled and jostled as she's dragged along.

"Whoa, what gives?"

Spotting a small park, Taciturn leads them out of the main hub and towards a bench. Sitting down, James finally lets go of Matilda.

She looks at him with something between concern and alarm.

"You okay, dude?"

He nods.

"I… I don't really *do* crowds. Look, just give me a minute…"

Whatever he needs, Matilda's concerned expression is the exact opposite of it. James digs for his pack of cigarettes, partly to temporarily avoid her scrutiny. Only one cigarette remains. Taciturn doesn't look up when Matilda speaks.

"When was the last time you had water?"

He shakes his head and finally looks at her.

"Seriously, I'm fine."

Matilda offers a smile.

"Sure you are, dude. I'll tell you what. I'm thirsty, so just wait right here, and I'll be right back."

Taciturn appreciates her not pressing the issue.

"Fine, but buy me some smokes. Here…"

He reaches into his inventory, creates a dedicated group account, and transfers some credits into it.

"If you're flyin', I'm buyin'."

Matilda smiles wider and accepts the pending invitation.

"Okay, Gramps. Stay put. With your old age, I don't need you wandering off."

As Matilda enters the convenience store across from the station, Taciturn allows himself a rare, genuine laugh in spite of himself. It feels good.

He lights his last cigarette, waiting for the nicotine to even him out. There isn't a much more reassuring way to put it. Too much time in the wilds of the Cyberside has left him ill-equipped for a crowd of this magnitude. James looks down at his indexation watch and sees the numbers lagging slightly – the collective effect of a massive amount of entities submitting requests to the System. He weighs the chances of potential anomalies in the swarm of people around him, slowly exhaling smoke, trying to refocus his thoughts.

When humankind could no longer hold back the mounting environmental catastrophes of a dying world, waves of new inhabitants flooded the Cyberside to escape. Like lizards molting, they shed their physical bodies without question. However, the safety of the mass migration was far from certain. Even the most optimistic Fall Water Lake analysts estimated that, with the increase in demand and the bandwidth necessary to process requests, up to 5% of transfers would almost certainly end in failure. The result of each of these transfer failures would be a consciousness partially lost – or worse, a

transformation into an anomaly.

While that projected 5% failure-rate still terrified the statisticians, it was inarguably preferable to the alternative, guaranteed 100% failure rate of staying in the real world – insignificant, compared to waiting around to see if the catastrophic greenhousing would outrun the biodiversity implosion. What's 5 out of every 100 participants? Not many. Who wouldn't be ready to roll those dice? But when the sample size proved to trend into the millions, the results were as predictable as they were horrific. Friends, coworkers, and family members became psychopaths, mutants or monsters. Was it worth the price of salvation?

James feels another memory rearing its unwelcome head, and he takes another deep, lung-filling hit of the tobacco. He tries to recall something else, anything else – but his thoughts take barbed hold, reeling him back to a place both familiar and terrible. His hand opens, trembles, and closes into a fist. James feels the bytes of data start trickling back to the forefront of his mind.

In his current state, Taciturn can't do a thing to stop it.

#

It's one of his exceedingly rare days off, and his wife, Sarah, is smiling. James has taken her and their son, Timothy, out of town to the famous Reserve. A rare opportunity, even for the wealthy, to visit, however fleetingly, with the past. The Reserve still has green grass, and visitors are able to walk around without protection. It's a heavily guarded and environmentally-quarantined zone that houses a park, a small lakeside resort, an actual forest, and much-coveted fresh air – all of it protected by a carefully constructed, camouflaged dome that encloses the sector.

They've come for a three-day vacation, the longest one James has taken in recent memory. As they settle into the small bed and breakfast, James takes in the décor. Their room is themed in a stylistic flurry of early twenty-first century motifs. Anywhere else, it might seem in poor taste, things being what they are – but here, it's a perfect part of the jigsaw charm. His family finishes unpacking their bags, and they couldn't be happier. Timothy has set up his prized selection of toys on his bed, while Sarah has already slipped into her swimsuit and bathrobe. Unpacking his suitcase, James pulls out his phone – the device which tethers him to Fall Water Lake's relentless work-cycle. It's gotten to the point where the sound of an email notification causes a nervous twitch in his hand. Laughing, he tosses the device into the suitcase. The Reserve has designated cellular and Wi-Fi areas, and this

isn't one of them. James intends to spend the trip without distractions.

As his son's green army men mount their coverlet-wide offensive against a stuffed T-Rex, his wife hums in the bathroom. James beams with satisfaction. Soon, they'll go to dinner at the local diner, Jannuzzi's. He'll splurge and order a juicy, real-meat burger and fries and watch his son make a complete mess devouring his favorite dish – spaghetti and meatballs. Later, he'll enjoy a bottle of wine or two with his wife, and they'll luxuriate under the holographic projection of a pixel-perfect sunset.

This is what all the hard work has been about. The countless overtime hours are finally paying off. Standing in an expensive 'roadside' motel room, James wants to hold onto this memory forever.

But his son's laughter begins to fade, and the walls crumble away before his eyes.

Something unseen grabs his shoulder and shakes him, pulling him back into the Cyberside.

#

He's on a bench, looking groggily up. Matilda stands over him, one hand holding a plastic bag, the other shaking his shoulder.

"Come on – let's find you a real place to rest, and actually come up with a plan."

Taciturn starts to protest, half of him still in another world, the memory still a critical drain on his reserves. Spotting a battered-looking motel not two blocks distant, James points at its unpromising neon sign without saying a word. Abruptly, he finds himself on his feet, walking slowly towards the motel. Eyes fixed on the ground, he finds Matilda walking alongside him, helping maintain his balance. They enter the motel lobby through old wooden doors that announce their arrival with an irritating chime.

Standing behind the nearby counter is a scruffy, elderly man who watches James with piercing blue eyes. Eyes that recognize a Taciturn, and Taciturn and know enough not to ask unwarranted questions.

James concentrates on the old man to help refocus his mind on this reality. Something about the man seems familiar. "We'd like a room, please."

The clerk nods and extends a hand holding a room key. That's when James notices the crossed rhombus tattoo on the man's right forearm – a sign that he's dealing with a Hermit. An enigmatic group, Hermits have resigned to live in this new data obsessed digital world of the Cyberside, but avoid filling their consciousness with

meaningless information. The tattoo is a program designed to safeguard their cherished memories by minimizing the impact of day to day events on the Hermit's storage capacity. At the end of each System-day, they carefully select what is committed to their permanent memory. Exactly *how* a Hermit determines what is important enough to commit to memory is a mystery to James.

With a calm, measured voice, the man answers. "Room number nine. Up the stairs, to the left."

Cautiously, Matilda takes the key from the motel owner's hand. She returns to James' side, and they both make their way to the stairs. It's only when they reach the first step that the owner calls out again.

"And, Taciturn – *you're responsible for the Scry."*

Matilda's hands instinctively reach for her blades, but James reacts quickly to stop her, fixing her gaze with his own. "As you say, Hermit," he answers, casting a glance over his shoulder. "No innocents will be harmed tonight."

An unnatural smirk breaks through the folds of the old man's wrinkled face and unkempt beard. He shakes his head.

"There are no innocents, Taciturn. All are guilty of something."

The Hermit's other hand reaches up from behind the counter and James tightens his grip on Matilda. He can feel the muscles of her body tensing, but the Hermit's hand rises in the form of the *mano pantea.*

"Death comes for all in this town, Taciturn. For both those who deserve it and for those who unknowingly await escape." The Hermit lowers his hand, "I will remember you."

The mercenary releases his grip on the Scry, exhales, and concludes the ritual phrase of the Hermits.

"As I do remember you, Hermit."

A run-in with a Hermit is no small matter, and the experience has shaken James' mind nearer to wakefulness. Side by side, he and Matilda make their way up the stairs.

Chapter 8: “The Hunt”

The instant the door closes behind them, Matilda blurts what both of them are thinking.

“How the *hell* does he know I’m a Scry? I thought the whole point of Stephen’s work was to hide me!”

James slowly paces across the room’s worn carpet. “I… I don’t know. Hermits are strange people. Nobody really understands anything about them. He must have seen something else in you. I mean, the disguises worked on the train, didn’t they?”

Matilda throws her hands up in irritation. “How the hell am I supposed to know? More importantly, how can we trust that old man not to rat us out? I mean, right now, how do we know he isn’t—”

Taciturn’s hand is flexing open and closed.

“He isn’t. Probably. Hermits’ whole philosophy revolves around them not interfering with others. They’re too preoccupied with holding onto their own past.” His words don’t sound as comforting as they’re supposed to, even to himself. He sits on the edge of one of the beds. It groans under his weight.

All at once, it’s as if the sound brings the whole of the room’s squalor to their keen attention. They’re surrounded by dilapidated walls with chipped paint, stained and tattered curtains, a cracked data terminal, and a bathroom that looks unsavory at the most generous assessment. Matilda sighs heavily and sits down on the other bed. It too has something to say about the state of their accommodations.

“I don’t trust the guy. I don’t like the way he looked at me. Which means we need to move fast. I’ve been thinking about it. Won’t we need access codes to get into Donovan’s Tower?”

James doesn’t answer. He stares dully at, and then distantly through, the cracked glass of the data terminal’s reflective surface. He too has been thinking about how they’ll get into the Tower.

“I understand.”

Matilda persists, “I mean, it’s not like we can just walk up the front gate and say ‘Hey, just two dudes here to see the boss man’…”

She fidgets at his continued silence. “We’re going to need… special access, y’know? Like, something that can get us through a side entrance or something. Like… something a security guard would have.”

Taciturn’s reflection stares back at him. Knowing where this is headed. Not any happier about it.

“Yes,” he says.

Neither of them speaks for what seems like a very long time as the fading daylight beyond the single grimy window makes its way

through the moth-eaten curtains. The disheartened reflection in the fractured terminal-glass goes through the motions of lighting a cigarette.

It is the Scry who breaks the prolonged silence.

"I mean, I'm just saying. You promised the guy downstairs that nobody is going to die tonight."

James exhales a stream of smoke. "I said no *innocents* were going to die." The Taciturn in the cracked terminal-glass meets his gaze with level, mute judgment. "I think we're both clear enough on what we need to do."

Matilda all but springs off the bed. She will be hunting tonight. The Scry instinct that's been straining at its chains fairly writhes in anticipation. In a single fluid motion, Matilda scoops up her gear. Shaking out her hair, she opens the door and strides out into the corridor, leaving a pensive Taciturn staring silently at his own reflection.

#

Matilda makes her resolute, solitary way through the gathering bustle and din of the city's approaching night. Her lips are slightly parted, her movements smooth and graceful, her eyes slightly narrowed. To a passerby, she might well look drugged, and it's not too far from the truth. Now that she's on the hunt, her Scry faculties have taken the wheel, and she is as much along for the ride as in charge of it.

First, she connects herself to a plane of the Cyberside accessible only to her kind. Even as she moves with, through and athwart the street-throngs of Babylon, Matilda sees the world with a heightened perception the multitudes around her could hardly begin to comprehend. People move past her as blurs of vectored, logged data-packets, but anything she focuses on resolves in absolute clarity. Each individual's coding emanates an exclusive signature, the Cyberside analog of a given prey's unique scent, and Matilda roams the streets until she finds one of the sort she's looking for. It doesn't take her long to zero in on one, and it leads her directly to the kind of establishment she imagined from the start. A perverse, rebellious part of her hopes that it doesn't stay *this* easy.

Despite the earliness of the hour, a considerable line has already formed at the club, eager patrons awaiting the arbitrary, aesthetic judgment of the gate-keeping bouncers. Matilda makes her way to the front, where she is granted immediate entrance into the dimly-lit club – to a chorus of objections by the primped and perfumed women

in line, not to mention no insignificant number of appreciative looks from certain of the males in waiting. She makes her way into the strobelit, darkened clamor of the club.

As always, when she is close to her goal, another ability triggers inside her. Her hunger allows her to see events a few minutes ahead. Changing, transforming into the present, for the sake of the future that has already happened. She sees fragments of thoughts, clouds of desires, colors of the moods of those around her. Through the tangling mess of bodies and urges, she sees him. The one who is destined to become a part of her memories, her personal archive of information. He will disappear from the world of the Cyberside, leaving her to keep all what he once was. To be stored in her small but valuable treasure-memory, which will give her the means to live.

The Scry moves to the bar, where her target sits, staring at a half-empty glass of whiskey. The man has long changed out of his Tower uniform, of course, but she nevertheless sees its imprint well enough, still on him. A sense of pride and proxy authority flows from it, not quite masking deeper accretions of pain, inadequacy, and general, free-floating discontentment.

As Matilda studies her prey from her end of the bar, a bartender appears in her peripheral vision and asks her what she'd like to drink. She orders a cosmopolitan. While waiting for her drink, she notices her target noticing *her,* and she returns the favor. When her drink arrives, she's finally ready to start her game. She takes half the over-cranberried concoction at a single slug and makes certain that the target registers her level gaze before she makes her way over to him.

"Hey mister, have a light?"

He doesn't immediately respond, but her presence and attention to him must be sufficiently alluring, as Matilda hasn't even produced a visible cigarette.

"Uh… yeah, sure." Reaching into his pocket, he produces a plastic lighter of a neon hue that screams 'gas station'. "I'm. I'm Dominic, by the way."

Matilda reaches out to take the lighter, and her touch lingers on his hand just so much before finally taking it from him. It doesn't take long for Dominic's firewalls to melt. Within minutes, they exchange views, a checkmark catalog of mutual interests, a half-dozen more artfully-accidental touches. He puffs his chest and musters what swagger he can.

"Oh sure, The Tower. Yeah, I work there. I'm pretty much the Head of Security."

She knows he's lying, but his clearance is more than sufficient for what they need.

"You're keeping us all safe." Matilda places a hand on his leg.

“You don’t even know what it means to people. People like me.”

Dominic’s eyes dilate even more. He nervously slams back the rest of the alcohol in his glass.

Within thirty minutes – and after a light kiss – Matilda has woven a truly inspired backstory, a veritable rolling tapestry about a shattered family, a difficult youth. Dominic accepts this information with white-knight earnestness and begins divulging intimate confidences of his own. Despite the loud, crowded club it’s as if the two of them have cut themselves off from the rest of the world. Matilda revels in the euphoric momentum of his utter, transported enchantment. His desire to comfort her burns through his crippling shyness. An unspoken, seething heat – no less intense for either of them, although ignited by radically-different chemistries – blazes inside both of them.

Through that strange, warping fugue of mutual but variant desire, she finds herself in his dark apartment. She asks him whether he has anything more to drink, and Dominic pours two glasses of cheap wine. She takes his hand and stares into his eyes. He is completely open. There are no barriers between them now. She puts her glass of wine on the table, and they merge in a long, deep, final kiss.

Dominic doesn’t even notice as the inky darkness begins to consume his eyes

Even if he does, it’s too late. That dam has been blown. Information and memories begin to flow into the devouring Scry.

His memories, his true memories, play for both to see. One losing them, the other gaining them forever. The moments of truth, the moments of his real life. All thought lost when he interfaced with the System and joined the Cyberside.

Growing up in a suburb of Los Angeles. School. The parents. Christmas in Tahoe. His first kiss. The family moving to Boston. A lonely prom. Berkeley. Joining a raucous fraternity. The brotherhood of Sigma Alpha Epsilon. Working as an intern in Silicon Valley. Promotions. A wedding. Vacation in Italy. A son. Head of Information Security Department. A funeral with two caskets, one smaller than the other. Alcoholism. Lonely evenings. Mass-media chaos. Global panic. A dying world. The decision to leave for the network. Details. Details. Details. Little fragments of what had been his life. He sees it all.

Then his life in the Cyberside.

Trying to start anew. Working at the Tower. System memories substituted for real ones. Raids. Roundups. A child torn away from its mother. Endless batches of slaves entering into the city. Meeting Donovan face to face. Access codes for security systems. Hidden security entrances into the Tower. Attempts to break away from meaningless routines.

Attempts to escape from this world.

Each memory fades as the life drains out of his shell, his eyes slowly closing. As the last few stray streams of data are drained from his mind, all that he once was now becomes part of her.

She experiences his last thought. It's almost always the same, with those she's consumed: *Remember me.*

Not the way he is *here,* but as he once was – before this world.

Before the migration.

His lifeless lips part from hers. His body collapses to the floor. With tears streaming down her cheeks, Matilda sits down next to him.

"Thank you, Dominic," Matilda says to the dark, silent room. "I'll remember you, I promise."

It takes her longer than usual to recover, but eventually Matilda composes herself.

Carefully closing the apartment door behind her, a solemn Scry makes her solitary way back to a dreary motel room.

Where a Taciturn waits in silence.

Chapter 9: “The Tower”

Matilda and Taciturn stare up at the looming presence of Donovan’s Tower. For the first time since their arrival in Babylon, James is starting to seriously doubt they’ll have enough time.

He wants to trust the information Matilda has acquired with her Scry powers, but it’s led them to an offshoot of the complex – and a dead end. His frustration reaches a critical point when he notices the girl continuing to walk towards the wall.

“What… what are you doing?”

She either ignores him or doesn’t hear. Stepping right up to the wall, Matilda pushes on a wad of gum stuck to it. A holographic keypad appears, and Matilda quickly enters a series of codes. Once she keys the final code, the wall retracts, revealing an entrance. Satisfied, Matilda turns to face him, grinning.

“Did you see that?”

Nodding his acknowledgment, James steps through the discovered doorway. The passageway is dark, but eventually leads to a large chamber. Large statues flank both sides of the room.

“Um… this wasn’t part of Dominic’s memories. What the hell is this?”

Perplexed, Taciturn cautiously evaluates the chamber.

“I don’t know. Stay close.”

Pistol in hand, he steps past large statues of Osiris and Isis, Thoth and Amon, Gor and Meshenet. All are dwarfed by the massive Sphinx that resides at the far end of the chamber.

A noise from behind the Sphinx startles them both. James steals behind Thoth, pulling Matilda with him. The Scry silently unsheathes one of her blades. James was hoping to avoid a fight – or to at least get farther before one started.

“How did they know we were coming?” Matilda whispers next to him. “I bet that Hermit sold us out.”

Instead of the tromp of combat boots, James hears the squeaky wheels of an approaching cart and the wet *splot* of a mop hitting the marble floor.

Before he can stop her, Matilda emerges from behind the statue.

Taciturn preemptively winces, anticipating an instant onslaught of gunfire. Instead, Matilda’s voice echoes through the chamber.

“Uh, hi there. How’s it going?”

An unfamiliar voice answers, equally augmented by the acoustics of the hall. “It’d be better if you’d tell your friend back there to stop leaning against the statue. I just cleaned it.”

Succumbing to his curiosity, James peeks from the safety of his

cover. He's surprised to see a grey-haired man in drab overalls mopping the floor in front of the Sphynx. Seeing Taciturn, the man grunts.

"Put that pea shooter away, young man. You're likely to hurt yourself, and *I'll* have to clean it up." James lowers his weapon. "Good. Now, what are you two doing, sneaking around this late? Don't you have better things to do?"

Matilda steps forward.

"I'm Matilda, and this is James. We're trying to speak with Donovan. I think he's been trying to have me killed."

Dumbfounded by her frankness, Taciturn raises his gun again. His internal analysis shows no outcome now that doesn't lead to violence.

But it is only the old man's laugh that reverberates throughout the room.

"Oh, that's a good one. Seriously, darling. If everyone Donovan Craze was trying to kill showed up, we'd have a line out the door. Hell, I'd probably be standing in it. So, you're trying to see the big man, but don't know how to get past the riddle room, huh?"

Now Taciturn steps forward. "'Riddle room'?" He looks at the gun he is still pointing, blinks, and lowers it again.

The old man leans on his mop, "Yeah, you know. 'To enter, you must answer these three questions' nonsense. Idiotic, you ask me."

James scans the severe, sculpted faces of the statues around them.

"What type of questions?"

The old man nibbles the inside of his cheek before answering.

"Jeez, you'd think I could remember them all by now. The first one's some riddle about man and gods. Something about what separates ignorance from knowledge. Hold on, it'll come to me…"

Taciturn steps closer to the Sphynx.

"Time."

Matilda's says from behind him, "Yeah, I get it. You don't think we have time for this—"

Taciturn shakes his head. "No, that's the answer. That's what separates ignorance from knowledge. *Time*."

The old man's eyes widen.

"Yeah, I think you're right. Hold on, this is good. Let me think of the next one…"

Matilda moves closer to the custodian.

"Have we met before…?"

He waves his hand dismissively and chuckles.

"I doubt that, darling. I'm sure I'd remember someone as lovely as yourself."

Matilda smiles but still raises an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Uh huh. Well, thanks for helping us with this."

The old man leans forward on his mop.

"Eh, don't mention it. It's not like Donovan's done anything good for me. Unless you count constantly making messes. You should see the one he's started up there."

Taciturn slowly holsters his pistol but can't shake the feeling that they're being watched.

The old man continues. "Let's see, the second one goes something like, 'Our world is dead, but life goes on. What truly then is life?'"

Taciturn scans the expanse of the chamber, wondering if their breach into the Tower has been noticed. If patrol routines are already tracking their presence. If the old man is stalling.

"On second thought, we need to get out of here. If you can't help us…"

Taciturn rests his hand back on the butt of his pistol. And then Matilda suddenly blurts,

"An idea!"

Both men look at her – the one beside her startled, the one before her simply pleased.

"I know this one," Matilda says. "'An idea can bridge both time and death.' Something like that. Am I right?"

The custodian's nodding, smiling face answers her question.

"Smart girl. Brilliant girl. How did you know that one?"

Matilda's excitement vanishes instantly. Her forehead wrinkles with concern. "I… I don't know. I just remember hearing it a bunch of times."

James scans the room again, this time for exits. "Do you know the last one or not? We really don't have time for this." A thought occurs to him, cold and unwelcome. "Wait. How did *you* get in here?"

The elderly man strokes his beard, suddenly coming to attention as if from far away. "Hmm? Do what, now?"

James points an accusing finger at the man. "How do *you* get into this room? Clearly you don't solve a bunch of riddles every time you come through here."

The man's cheeks redden. He looks at the floor.

"Look, mister, before you get mad – I just got caught up in it all."

"Um—" Matilda begins, from behind him.

Taciturn draws his pistol out and advances on the custodian. The old man throws his open hands up, letting his mop handle fall *thwack* to the marble floor.

"A key. I have a *key*! Just take it easy—"

Without a word, Taciturn sticks out his hand, palm up.

Reluctantly, the old man reaches into his pocket and pulls out a metal key, flinching as Taciturn grabs it. The custodian points to the far side of the room.

“There’s a service exit over there. Before you do anything, just remember – I’ve been more cordial than I should be, things being what they are. Two folks sneaking about and such…”

Key in hand, James balls his fist. “Come on, Matilda. We’ve wasted enough time.” Matilda follows him across the room, her gaze darting back to the custodian.

James steps up to the door and slides the key home. As he unlocks the door, James hears the old man’s voice from the chamber:

“What is between mystery and music, between doors to the future and answers?”

Looking down at the key in his hand, Taciturn then turns to once again see an old man pushing his cart and humming to himself.

Matilda grabs his hand, “Come on. Let him go. He helped us.”

James follows her, pondering these kind words from a merciful Scry.

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James drives the old man from his thoughts. He follows Matilda down the otherwise-featureless service corridor to an exit, but something about the door he finds there feels eerily familiar. James swears he’s seen it before but can’t place it.

Before he can say anything, Matilda pushes the door open, and James is blinded by a bright light.

When his eyes adjust, James finds himself in the spacious foyer of Fall Water Lake’s California branch, exactly as he remembers it.

Exactly as he remembers it.

The late-evening Babylon gloom has instantly given way to a bustling early Southern California morning, the beginning of the day for the assiduous ranks of Fall Water Lake’s employees.

Furnished with a Postmodern scheme and trappings, the reception room exudes expensive excellence. Couriers dart around delivering packages, harried-looking interns hastily go about their assigned tasks, and high-level employers talk on their phones while striding purposefully toward the elevators.

If the new, bustling scene comes as a surprise to James, it does so triply for Matilda: “What the shit?”

“It’ll be fine, trust me,” Taciturn says, moving towards the reception desk.

As they step forward, another light ripples over them–they’ve moved to a dedicated server, via a seriously fast connection. A quick glance at his indexation watch shows, to James’s relief, that the count has reset. He wonders how close they just cut it, and then decides he

doesn't want to know too precisely. Within seconds, the System reads and calibrates the new interface. Both of them are visibly startled by their sudden change in appearance.

James' street gear has been replaced with shorts and a striped polo shirt, identical to his code of dress during his brief tenure at the real-world Los Angeles office. Next to him, Matilda's clothes and gear have been replaced with an unlikely, light summer dress that swirls with her every movement. Sandals, handbag, neatly packed blond hair, and sunglasses make the Southern Californian guise complete.

Almost as an afterthought, James reluctantly looks down to where his holstered pistol should be, and isn't.

Matilda's personal arsenal has also evidently disappeared with the passing light. She pats her body instinctively, trying to find the blades that aren't there. "Oh, you've got to be kidding."

James feels something welcomely familiar in his own pocket and reaches in. Muttering a word of indiscriminate thanks, James feels his trusty crumpled pack of cigarettes.

"Suppose they don't kill fast enough to be taken away," he says to himself.

Looking over at the reception desk, James notices an attractive woman waving at him. She sits behind the desk, ever vigilant, just as James knew her to be once upon a real world. Sizing up the baffled pair, the woman at the desk offers a sad smile.

"Hey there, James. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Taciturn approaches and rests both hands on the desk counter.

"It has, Rachel. You look… good."

The woman rolls her eyes and lets out sigh.

"Sorry. It just stops being a compliment, these days. Or at least, it'd be more of a compliment if I actually had a choice in the matter." She stops her own rant before it begins. "But thank you, James. I appreciate it."

Rachel opens a drawer at the side of her desk and produces two yellow guest passes with their names and photos on them.

"Here, keep these with you at all times. They'll give you access to everywhere you're allowed to be. They'll be active for 4 hours, but my understanding is you'll be out of here much sooner."

James takes the badge handed to him, but Matilda is conspicuously hesitant to take her own from Rachel's extended hand.

"Wait. What? But… how could you have…?"

Rachel smile fades as she closes Matilda's hands around the pass.

"Oh, honey. If he didn't know you were coming, you wouldn't be here."

Rachel shifts her focus to Taciturn.

"Donovan is waiting for you on his floor, James. He also said that

he's very much looking forward to discussing everything with you."

James tries to find the right words.

"Rachel, I…"

But they elude him.

"I guess, thanks," is all James gets out before turning to move toward the elevators.

Matilda fidgets with the badge around her neck. Once they are out of earshot, she speaks up.

"So, you want to explain that to me? She seems too nice to be here."

Taciturn clenches and unclenches his fist, finds himself doing it, wills himself to stop.

"I'm sure if she had the chance, she'd slit Donovan's throat just as soon as you would." Matilda nods toward Rachel's desk.

"She *works* for the monster."

The elevator hums as it descends to their level.

"She's trapped here just like everyone else. I doubt she's even allowed to leave that desk." Matilda looks again, this time with quiet, dawning horror, in the direction of the lobby.

"But… why would Donovan do something like that? It's so… *messed up.*"

The elevator doors open with a cheery *ding*!

"I don't think Donovan sees it the same way she does."

Chapter 10: “The Deal”

As they ascend in the glass elevator past seemingly endless floors, Matilda mentally prepares for the inevitable. At the top floor of this Tower, she’ll be face to face with the man that’s been sending hunters after her for as long as she can remember.

Answers first, she reminds herself, grinding her teeth – after that, and *only* after that, she can put an end to all this. For the third time in as many minutes, she instinctively reaches to where her knives ought to be, and for the third galling time, she finds nothing. The strange light at the building’s entrance has taken her precious blades, sheathed in the comfortable, familiar weight of her vest, and left her nothing in exchange but this ridiculous, thin dress. Matilda closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. It carries her back to her first slaver kill. She didn’t even have her knives then, and she made do well enough. She lets the air out of her lungs and focuses on the instincts that have kept her alive. In her peripheral vision, she can see Taciturn’s gun-hand opening and closing, clenching and unclenching.

As the elevator rises, the city lights begin to disappear into the smog below. Matilda watches as the buildings gradually fade to primitive shapes. Wrapped in simple low-resolution textures, they continue to decrease in detail as the elevator rises. The farther they get from the surface, the fewer resources are drawn by the System to maintain these details. Generated clouds obscure visibility, and the buildings on the horizon are unloaded and replaced with pure, impossibly blue sky. With each second of their ascent, several distant, washed out features and template groups of buildings create the impression of a skyscrapered gridwork now far below them.

The elevator slows and Matilda readies herself as best she can. When the elevator eventually stops, the doors open to reveal a richly decorated office. At the far end is an ornate desk, with massive dynamically-tinting windows comprising the entire wall behind it. The vista beyond the wall is an acrophobe’s nightmare in polarized, muted hues of sun, sky and cloud-layer. Pictures from the golden age of the twentieth century hang on the other walls. Matilda can see her reflection in the polished marble floors. Imposing alabaster columns hold up a high, painted ceiling. But the most conspicuous aspects of this office are the glass cases, at least twenty of them, arranged in the fashion of exhibits in a museum. Varying in size, some of these cases house what appear to be rusty tools, archaic machinery, and at least one living creature – a purple lizard that presses its peeling body against the glass.

Behind an imposing semicircular desk at the focal point of this

ostentatious, sterile menagerie, Donovan Craze sits comfortably in a chair that, in another setting, might be taken for a throne.

As they exit the elevator, Donovan stands up. Matilda assesses the Babylonian ruler. Aside from his expensive suit, nothing about Donovan matches how Matilda had imagined him. The handsome, well-groomed man smokes a cigar in one hand and holds a snifter of brandy in the other.

"James!" he smiles, smoke still rising from his cigar. His hearty voice booms in welcome through the large space that is more gallery than office. "Welcome to the Tower, my friend." The elevator doors close behind them with a barely-audible hiss.

James responds with a nod both cool and decorous, but Donovan is undeterred. Grinning, he gestures to a pair of exquisitely-upholstered armchairs in front of his desk.

"Please, sit."

As they stand gazing at his imposing desk, his venture sanctum, Matilda catches sight of something prominently displayed within one of the glass cases nearest the elevator. The katana looks incredibly old… but it would get the job done. *Answers first,* she reminds herself.

"And this must be the infamous Matilda. I see you've noticed the first Taciturn weapon. Tell me, honestly. What's it been like, traveling with one of them, so far?" He makes a sweeping gesture with the hand holding the cigar to include James and lets out a hearty laugh. Matilda opens her mouth to challenge him, but Donovan continues without pause.

"Well! It's *great,* to finally have us all together."

Turning away from them, Donovan gazes out the glass window to the infinite skybox beyond.

"What happened, James? You used to be so *smart*. Perhaps all that time spent in the badlands has dulled your edge."

He turns back to James and Matilda to find them still standing by the elevator, and a disappointed frown materializes on his chiseled face.

"Seriously, friends, you insult me. Given all the resources I've spent making sure we all met, I'm offended that you think I'd do you any harm. Please, take a seat."

Taciturn approaches the chairs without a word. Hesitantly, Matilda follows, muscles and instincts wound tight, ready to pounce at the first wrong move. Amid the stronger, free-floating smells of cigar smoke, brandy, and aggressively-expensive cologne, her heightened senses pick up two subtler, keenly-pleasurable scents: Coffee and tea. She spots a silver tray with two cups, resting on a short table between the two chairs. The cups sit next to an unopened pack of cigarettes and an ashtray.

Donavan observes the two with what could pass for giddiness.

"Please let me know if I chose incorrectly. I can have something else brought in. As host, I feel it's only polite."

James glances at the offerings. Matilda notes James' wistful expression as he regards the sealed, fresh pack of cigarettes on the tray. Even the cigarette packaging looks somehow inordinately expensive, enticing. Instead, James takes the worn, crumpled cigarette pack from his own pocket and pulls one out.

"We ditched the need for pleasantries a while back now, Donovan. Time to explain what the hell is going on."

Donovan grins and nods in firm agreement.

"Fair enough. I'll get right to the point. Something is happening with the System that threatens all of us."

James pauses in the act of lighting his cigarette. He locks eyes with Donovan.

"What are you talking about?"

The same question burns in Matilda's mind, although her first instinct is to ask it with nothing like the Taciturn's calm detachment. It must show on her face. Donovan turns his attention from James to her, and Matilda's words catch in her throat. Up close, she's equally fascinated and appalled by the deadness of Donovan's eyes, in such stark contrast to his grinning mug. Donovan begins speaking again, still looking at her. Matilda suppresses a shudder.

"All this time and you're still out of touch, James. Unable to see the big things right in front of you."

Donovan's eyes focus back on James. Matilda exhales a breath she wasn't aware she'd been holding.

"Let me try to paint this with broader strokes you'll understand. Unlike you, I've always been a 'bigger picture' kind of guy."

Donovan immediately holds up his hands, as if warding off a blow, "Now I'm not saying that what you do is wrong. I just look at things differently. It's why I ultimately control one of the System's four key regions, and you… well."

Taciturn now openly glares at him through the clouds of smoke but doesn't say anything. Donovan continues.

"Nevertheless, I can't believe that one of the foremost engineers in this world simply *doesn't pay attention*. No. How could you not see the little changes in the System, the little deviations from the world *you* helped design? They're happening more frequently than ever."

Donovan leans forward, and Matilda can hear the barely-contained excitement thrumming in his compelling, sonorous voice.

"In fact, I would say that you've seen some of these deviations firsthand."

Donovan gestures with his cigar ever-so-slightly at Matilda,

raising his eyebrows at James. James exhales a long, deliberate plume of smoke that Matilda assumes was meant to waft over Donovan's face, but the Babylonian ruler has already turned back to the window.

James speaks to the back of his head: "I focus on the problems I can control."

"Yes, I'm sure you think that." Donovan says.

With Donovan facing the window, Matilda reaches for the dog tag around her neck. Since Homestead, she has known there is something more to James than he lets on. He remains unique among the hunters sent after her – and not just because he is the only one she has allowed to stay alive. Sure, his thorough knowledge of the Cyberside could be attributed to his travels, but there are other things – like his engineering horse whistle. But a *lead engineer!* Part of the team that created the Cyberside. That was a surprise. She reflects on their first meeting, gripping the tag ever tighter.

Donovan lets out a sudden, harsh laugh that startles Matilda. "Forgive me, James, but I do believe you're a liar. You chose the ridiculous path of a Taciturn, trying to limit this world's impact on your mind, when you could have fully embraced it."

Donovan casually points a finger at Matilda, but this time he does not look at her.

"You've devoted yourself to hunting anomalies? Isn't that paying attention to the details at a micro-level?"

Matilda squirms in her chair. Donovan knows exactly what she is.

She opens her mouth to say something, anything – but she's cut short by another dry response from the Taciturn.

"Let's not waste time on semantics. Get to the point, Donovan."

Still grinning, the leader of Babylon continues patronizingly.

"Of course. I didn't bring you here to argue."

Donovan reaches for his brandy.

"The fact is that the System has been evolving, maturing. You haven't denied it. So, I can assume you've seen it become more… involved."

Taciturn clenches his fist on the padded arm of his chair but doesn't interrupt.

"Normally I'd say this isn't a bad thing – change can be good, and all that. But it's starting to get out of control. If that happens, it affects everyone. If you don't trust me, at least trust your sense of the greater good."

Matilda can't keep quiet with the exchange unfolding in front of her.

"Is somebody going to explain what's going on, or should I just leave?"

James crushes out his cigarette in the ash tray, casting a quick,

longing glance at the much nicer pack still on the silver tray. After a short pause, he lights another from his own sad, crumpled pack. Donovan remains silent, eyebrows politely arched, fingers tented expectantly.

"The System is established on a set of rules, but the original purposes of many of those rules have been subverted. Like with the traffic rule changes we've seen. And with each rule that gets changed or modified within the Cyberside, the System must either modify itself to accept the changes, or come up with alternatives to fix the underlying cause. As more things get out of hand, it becomes more and more likely that the System will start treating the cause of the problems as malware."

Matilda shakes her head in disbelief, unable to stay out of this any longer.

"You're saying the more people fuck up the Cyberside, the more likely the System will view *people* as a bug? That's impossible."

She sees the Taciturn flinch slightly, and suddenly fears she could be alarmingly wrong about this.

"There could be a… version of this where the System tries to correct the behavior. The result would be…"

Donovan finishes the sentence.

"Catastrophic. Well, at least for most. Despite all my attempts to make amends to you, I still don't expect you to trust me. I *do* expect you to do what's best for what you've helped build."

Matilda's mind wanders back to the samurai sword in the glass case. She vividly imagines herself slashing about with it as she throws herself back into their exchange.

"Okay, this reunion is great and all, but *I* came here to find out about who I am. You ready to explain why the hell you've been sending people after me?"

Donovan puffs from his cigar, causing the end to glow a seething red. He exhales, letting the smoke roil above his desk in a slow, wheeling carcinogenic galaxy, clearly relishing Matilda's discomfort. He turns towards her again, and her skin crawls.

"Ah, my dear. That was all a simple misunderstanding, but let's be blunt, shall we? You were killing my men. At the time, it made complete sense to stop you."

A lie, Matilda thinks. She can't bring herself to utter those words out loud, feeling paralyzed under Donovan's cold, reptilian stare. Donovan continues, looking past them now, at the entire expanse of the room.

"But I see no reason to dwell on the past. I have a plan to fix all this, and it requires the both of you."

He places his cigar in the ashtray, and steps from behind the desk,

past them and into the center of the room.

"I have to give you credit for finding one anomaly, James. As you can see, I've found several of my own," he says, still facing away from them.

Matilda eyes his exposed back, then the sword in the case. She imagines plunging the blade right between his expensively-clothed shoulder blades and forcing him to talk – at least for as long as he could manage it. With how meticulously prepared Donovan obviously was and is for this meeting, she doubts he has left anything up to chance.

Donovan stops at a glass case near the center of the room. "Let me show you something. If you both don't want to help after seeing it, you're free to walk out the front door."

James appears to be focused on something miles away. He comes back to himself, and nods to Matilda. She nods back. After the moment of silent deliberation, the two stand up and follow their host into the center of the room.

James and Matilda join Donovan around the case. A soft white glow emanates from within, and as Matilda gets closer, she catches a glimpse of the case's contents. Hovering in its center is a white, glowing sphere, partially encased in a matte gray shell. It's not large – something she could hold in her hand. Several smaller white spheres orbit around the object in varying attitudes, giving off a slight whirring. It sounds to Matilda like the frenzied fluttering of an insect's wings. As she presses nearer to it, she senses a warmth radiating from the orb.

Donovan's voice resonates in the otherwise-silent office. "Amazing, isn't it? You never really get used to it."

Babylon's ruler gazes deeply into the depths of the orb.

"As hard as I try, I can't understand it. It's here. Taunting me. As if all I need to do is close my hand, and its mine. But every time I do, it eludes me."

Matilda looks at the lights floating around the sphere, casting small, glowing reflections onto the glass. Staring at the orb in the center, Matilda can't help but feel it has somehow increased in intensity. The whirring sound rises slightly, almost imperceptibly, in pitch. Next to her, Taciturn stands silent and motionless, fixated on the object.

Donovan continues, "With this, you can view things from a distance. Sometimes even see a projection of the future. The key is determining the likelihood, the degree, of its accuracy."

Taciturn seems to wrench himself from his dazed state, and stares at the man before him.

"This shouldn't be possible, Donovan. We designed these to go

offline. What the hell have you done?"

Donovan mockingly puts his hands up in a defensive pose.

"Easy there, tiger. I didn't do any of this."

James points a finger at the pulsating orb.

"Bull*shit.* How did you fix a debug tool? It's impossible."

Donovan shrugs. "Unless…"

As if shocked sober, Taciturn finishes. "…the System wanted it to happen."

With a laugh, Donovan turns back to the sphere.

"There's the James I know."

He looks into James's eyes, stark shadows from the sphere's light rendering his face a chiseled sculpture.

"You don't like me. Honestly, I don't give a fuck. But the fact remains, we're standing here. Together. If an uneasy alliance is needed to help the System, who are we to argue?"

James is silent for a moment. Matilda notices his shoulders slump forward slightly. Despite all his readily apparent ill-will towards Donovan, James seems to be accepting this, whatever *this* is. Frustrated by being excluded, she speaks up.

"Uh… *hello?* Does somebody want to explain to me what the glowing thing is, and why I should give a crap?"

Donovan smirks and defers with a bowing gesture that is equal parts magnanimous and smug, waiting for James to explain.

The Taciturn's quiet words mingle with the buzzing of the orb:

"There were certain… quality-assurance tools used in the early stages of the Cyberside's development to monitor the System for any erratic or unwanted behaviors. Once everything was established, they were disconnected. Having one back online means the System is attempting to do something – fix something."

Donovan walks around the case, staring at the sphere inside, "I'll admit that things haven't been perfect in the Cyberside. That nasty war with Simmons and his Enclave may have gone a bit too far. Of course, I'd argue that he started it. But we all know there are four centers of power left in the Cyberside and there is always going to be some…" He shrugs. *"Friction."*

Taciturn frowns.

"Now James, no need for that look. I get it. You're an idealist, and my methods seem… aggressive to you. But I'm an entrepreneur."

James scoffs. "You mean 'opportunist'."

Donovan shrugs again.

"Agree to disagree. The Cyberside is a hard, new world – and just like the old one, there's no room in it for softness. It's a harsh place out there, and you know that. You might not like the structure we've created, but it is exactly that. Structure. Order. It is needed to create a

sustainable civilization. If I didn't plan or fight for traffic, Babylon wouldn't receive priorities from the System. You might disagree with how I do it, but I do my best to take care of the people here. I don't want my cluster to go black. Would you? Everything I do is to protect my city. And right now, I need your help to do it. You spend your time wandering the waste fighting monsters. I spend my time shepherding an entire city. So, let's just skip the 'holier than thou' attitude, James."

Matilda bites her tongue, trying to control her anger. This meeting has been unfolding entirely differently than she pictured. She came here hoping to get answers about herself, but these two men are more focused on talking about the System than about her. Matilda has reached her limit.

"Are you trying to ask us for something, dude, or are you just trying to convince us you're a bag of shit with a heart of gold?"

Donovan lets out a loud, genuine laugh that stirs flocks of echoes within the room.

"Fair enough, Matilda. There are four centers of power in the Cyberside: Babylon, Neverland, the Spire and Metropolis…"

Matilda interrupts him:

"You forgot one."

Surprised, James looks at her. Donovan only nods his approval.

"Correct, little one. There's technically one more in the Carolinas – the Triangle."

James shakes his head at the mention. "Nothing has come out of the Triangle for years. It's been completely closed off."

Donovan answers, but watches Matilda, grinning.

"Nothing that you would be aware of." Donovan addresses Matilda. "Don't worry, it's almost your turn."

He strides towards another glass case, smiling and beckoning her to follow. Matilda tentatively complies.

Within the much larger case, illuminated from all sides, is a dented flight helmet. Matilda doesn't recognize the object, although it makes her feel uncomfortable, and she doesn't know why. What she does recognize is its unmistakable shine. Like the tag around her neck, it is comprised entirely of titanium.

James pulls himself away from the orb and joins them. Donovan speaks to them both. "Of course, popular opinion is that nothing has come out of the Triangle for years. However, my newfound artifact" – he gestures back towards the glowing, faintly-whirring orb– "has enabled me to locate this, among many other anomalies."

Donovan makes a sweeping gesture which encompasses the entire room, and Matilda takes a moment to turn and regard the many glass cases again. She hears Donovan's voice behind her. "All of it evidence that something is terribly wrong with the world, and that something

catastrophic is coming. And all found with this artifact."

Matilda turns back to find Donovan's piercing eyes staring at her, but not meeting her eyes. He continues, "You wanted to know what part you play in this, girl? That pendant around your neck can give you access to a very special place in the Triangle. That's where we can fix the System."

Matilda clutches the dog tag firmly and rubs her finger on the titanium. All those hunters sent after her weren't to stop her attacks on the slavers. It was all to get him another artifact. Now he's trying a different approach. Whether it's his money, influence, coercion, persuasion – Donovan is a master of getting what he wants.

James moves closer to her side. He takes a moment, looking around the room at the various anomalies housed in cases. He lets out a resigned sigh, but his face remains stony.

"Even if what you say is true, getting to the Triangle is pointless. We can't fix the System unless we have all the keys."

Donovan reaches into his suit pocket and removes a gold card.

"Yes, the keys. Objects from each domain, entrusted to their leaders." He looks over the gleaming, impossibly-smooth object, turning it in his hands. "In case anything threatened the Cyberside, we would all come together and fix it. A noble concept. But we both know that won't happen, don't we James? Virginia and Tom would never leave their realms, and Hank… well, Hank isn't quite right in the head, is he?"

James shakes his own head in disbelief. "You can't seriously be asking us this."

Donovan shrugs. "Why not?"

James grunts the words out. "You want to reboot the System with different default parameters?"

Donovan steps away from the sphere. "If we don't, the whole world is going to burn."

Taciturn points an accusatory finger at him.

"You're just trying to get rid of the others without dirtying your hands, you son of a bitch."

Donovan gestures at the sphere in the center of the room.

"The world's going to burn, James. I've seen it."

Matilda imagines shattering the weapon case, snatching the katana, and then using it to extract some straight answers from the smug bastard. One wafer-thin slice at a time, if necessary. The theory is a wonderful vision. In practice, however, she finds herself paralyzed by even more mounting questions. Matilda starts to speak, falters, balls her fists, and finally unloads on him:

"All your flowery words aside, there's no way we can trust you. You tried to have me *killed.* You're okay with slavery. You, you're just

__”

James jumps in as well, trying to reacquire some of the conversation’s momentum from Donovan.

“She’s right. There’s no way we can be sure you’re going to reboot the System into something better.”

Donavon extends his hand, revealing the card one more time.

“You’re right. That’s why *you* two will.”

James and Matilda are momentarily stunned into silence. Before either can speak, Donovan plunges onward: “To prove that my intentions are sincere, I’ll entrust my key to you both. If you somehow make it all the way, you’ll have the power. *You.* Not me.”

Matilda watches the two men stare each other down. She can feel the energy from the sphere increase in pitch slightly. James speaks first, and his words carry across the room.

“What did you see in the debugger, Donovan? The System never gives a complete answer.”

Donovan extends a hand toward the sphere. “You wouldn’t believe me. Let’s just say, I’m confident in us winning.”

James’ hand opens and closes. Clenches and unclenches. “You mean *you* winning.”

Donovan smiles. The expression is unnerving, captivating, joyless. “As you said, James, ‘Let’s not waste time with semantics.’ Are you in or out?”

Donovan grins even more eagerly.

The Taciturn turns to the Scry and nods at her dog tag.

“It’s your necklace, Matilda. Your call. What do you want to do?”

The whirring sound from the orb increases in pitch again. Matilda looks back and forth between the two men and grips the tag tightly. She can’t remember anything before Homestead, and the emptiness gnaws at her every day – and will only continue to do so if she abandons her path now. Where would she go – back to Homestead, to live as a monster? If her dog tag can give her access to the Triangle, maybe the answers she seeks are there.

With James’ face turned toward her, Matilda notices a weariness around and under his eyes that she’s never seen before. If she’s going to do this, she wants to continue with him. He can be a bit dry and boring, but he’s trustworthy. And he’s a large part of the reason she’s standing in Donovan’s Tower right now. Not to mention he’s a lead engineer.

Matilda shoots him a beaming smile almost before she’s aware she’s doing it.

“I’m just trying to figure out who I am, and it sounds like this Triangle place might have some answers. If you’re asking me to save the world too, I think I can lend a hand.”

Sighing, James reaches out to take the key from Donovan, but the Babylonian leader quickly withdraws his hand.

“Now, you don’t think I’m foolish enough to give it to you right now, do you? Get to the Triangle with the other three keys, and I’ll transfer mine to you there. Can’t have you simply giving this to one of the others out of spite.”

Matilda stares into the orb, trying to catch a glimpse of anything – some sign of what Donovan might have seen. The orb’s glow intensifies, but she sees nothing.

“Where do we start?” she asks.

Donovan smirks, and Matilda knows he’s closed yet another deal – and acquired yet another anomaly. She hopes the exchange is worth it.

Chapter 11: “Neverland”

Matilda wakes to her seat jostling slightly. With bleary eyes, she groggily regards the empty passenger cabin of the high-speed connection plane that Donovan booked for them in Babylon. Taciturn sleeps in the seat next to her, his California attire now replaced by an unassuming blue suit, white button up shirt, and brown dress shoes.

“Would you care for a beverage?” a voice asks.

Matilda is surprised to see an actual human, not a program. She assumes working in the high-speed connection lines is a privileged position – especially considering the horrors she has witnessed on the ground.

“Um… sure, I guess. Can I get a gin and tonic, please? Also, how long until we land?”

The attendant hands her a clear plastic cup containing her beverage.

“There were some connectivity issues over the Utah Wastelands, but we’ll be arriving at the Virginian Neverland Airport in about an hour.”

Matilda sips the beverage and appreciates how strong the attendant made it.

“Oh, okay. Thanks.”

She looks out the window at the simple routine simulating the sky and clouds. Her memories are hardly more coherent than the scattered blue and white patterns cycling outside the window. Her mind tries to nail down pivotal moments, definitive images, from her past, but nothing concrete forms – the pictures are dim, the colors drained. It’s like reading a comic book under the covers with a flashlight whose batteries are dying.

“That, and most of the pages are blank,” she mutters to herself.

Matilda takes another, even more appreciative gulp of her drink. *The Triangle,* she thinks, nodding as if to an astute point raised by someone else entirely. If the Triangle holds the key to her memories, she’s eager to get started. But she’d be lying if she said she wasn’t nervous – scared even of what she might find.

Matilda closes her eyes and furrows her brow, trying to remember something, *anything,* with clarity. Was there any time *before* she was a Scry? When she didn’t live by devouring the memories of others? When her ravenous informational metabolism didn’t break her sources into pieces and analyze them into oblivion, discarding everything that didn’t matter?

She needs to keep those most precious pieces, to separate the vital wheat from the digital chaff. But each feeding now, she thinks, is

turning her into something she likes less and less. Was there ever a time when she was just like everyone else? Maybe once, there was a time, maybe back in the real w—

Matilda opens her eyes. Her forehead throbs. She is pumping a dry well.

Taciturn shifts in his seat, snoring gently.

Only three months ago, she was knee-deep in the misery and horrors of slavers and bounty hunters. Through it all, she knew the tag around her neck was not just a meaningless pendant. It had to be something bigger. Following her gut, she went into town and observed the Taciturn. Somehow, she had a feeling James would help her. What she didn't realize was how connected this man was. Donovan's words still resonate within her. As a lead engineer, James is responsible for this entire world. But two questions still bother her. Why did he abandon everything to be a Taciturn? And what are the memories he's trying to hold onto?

Matilda downs the rest of her alcohol. Beside her, James continues to sleep. The Scry can only guess what Taciturns dream of.

#

James is back to his first week at Fall Water Lake, his final interview having gone so well that the company asked him to start work immediately. James doesn't even mind that most of his paperwork has not been completed yet. He's too excited. With his first few official, incredible days under his belt, James is pleasantly overwhelmed at the opportunity this position will give him and his family.

The week has gone by in a blur, and now he sits comfortably on a plane, traveling across the country to collect his family. The flight between Los Angeles and Boston is long enough to give him time to think. As he lounges in the business class seat, he marvels at how rapidly things have been changing. Not merely for him, but for the world as a whole.

Networks, advanced computing technologies, miniaturization, personal mobile communicators, robots, virtual and augmented realities – all have revolutionized human society in just the earliest years of the 21st century. All have radically changed how individuals interact with those around them. How they view the world. Connectivity and consumption have conspired successfully to make people so linked digitally, yet so removed physically.

Elated at his new position and genuinely excited for the future for perhaps the first time in his life, James can't stop thinking, linking

fancy to projection to prediction. He's gone down this contemplative rabbit hole countless times, often over the course of a long night of drinking. Sipping more of his scotch and looking down on clouds through redundant layers of acrylic plastic, James grins, knowing where his brain is taking him. It's a shame that he doesn't have someone next to him to share it with. James knows that once his thoughts get going in this direction, the spectrum of discourse can narrow considerably.

Governments, as social institutions, have been lagging far behind the corporate sector in harnessing these new outlets and connecting with the people. Administrations continue to lose their relevance as one scandal bleeds into the next, and poor foresight makes them ever less able to cope with the speed of information. Throw in the three global economic meltdowns in the last decade alone, and a fundamental societal restructuring seems an inevitable conclusion.

The masses have forsaken their collective faith in traditional governing bodies, reinvesting it in major companies and alluring, flashy technologies. People are more likely connected with the owner of a similar gaming system than with a citizen of the same nationality. And as more global governments fall to bankruptcy, corruption, revolution or some combination of all three, all those willing to track the trends and face the numbers can see that the global economy has begun not merely passively deforming, but actively mutating.

Control and power continues to flow by greater ebbs and surges, into the hands of international corporations. In most cases, such entities have verifiably higher approval ratings – and indeed, more appealing personalities – than heads of parliament and members of congress. Without a doubt, corporations have more wealth stockpiled than major nations, and they extend their control over news and social media. With stories being changed or ignored, it's easy to shift the blame to the political sphere when big business feels the need.

With their exponential rise in power and influence, corporations have long since taken the lead in assembling think tanks to ensure and continually refine their continued success. It was through one of these very brain trusts that the conglomerates realized they could step in where the governments were failing. Through 'charitable services' to their global consumer base, they've incrementally cemented their public favor, ensuring themselves unprecedented access to valuable resources.

Thus began the founding of corporate-funded trade schools, housing-programs and even social institutes – a drastic furtherance of the *zaibatsu* model, taken to its most unbridled, visionary, neoutopian extreme. Orphans, the homeless, and ex-convicts were brought up in special subsidized, unabashedly-corporate housing and developmental

facilities – the lauded Collaborative Habitation Initiatives. Extensive education, strong leadership training, guaranteed jobs, and access to the latest technologies all helped provide these companies with skilled employees, workers with absolute loyalty to their future employers. Company schooling, company wellness care, company wedding chapel, company funeral home. While a vocal minority has long viewed this level of corporate entanglement as a detriment to national if not personal identity, a comfortable majority of the populace appreciates the lattice work of goodwill and unity – or at least the intentions thereof – that these groups have forged.

Thankfully, James is now part of this corporate elite, and he's proud of it. Having made it through an extensive interview process, he's climbed his way up to Lead AI Engineer at Fall Water Lake. He never dreamed he'd be working for the world's foremost pioneer in the online services development sector. It is a dream job for him. As he drinks 18-year-aged scotch in a comfortable business-class seat, James can't wait to see where this path will take him.

Soon he'll land, collect his family, and return to work. Things are finally looking up, and life feels exactly as it should.

#

A lurch of turbulence wakes Taciturn, and he finds himself in a different plane than the one from his memories. Matilda rests next to him, wearing the new business suit provided courtesy of Donovan. James notices a flight attendant replace an empty cup with a fresh drink. He gestures to the attendant that he'd like two of the same and asks Matilda, "Are we almost to Neverland?"

Matilda sips her drink through a straw and nods.

"She says it'll be about 20 minutes."

James notices a slight glassiness in Matilda's eyes.

"How many of those have you had?"

Matilda shrugs, leaning back in her chair.

"Does it matter? Donovan's paying for them, right?"

To himself, Taciturn allows that she makes a valid point.

"Is it true what they've been telling me about this Virginia woman?" Matilda asks. "Most of it sounds kind of ridiculous."

James shakes his head as two admirably-full drinks are placed on his tray table.

"Honestly, the truth is probably far worse than what you've heard. Neverland works on a hacked version of indexation. Most of the residents walk around in proxy bodies."

Matilda looks up from her drink. "Bodies of what?"

James takes a long pull from his drink, draining its contents. “Little children. It’s fucking weird. They’re all adults who’ve replaced their original bodies. And all these ‘kids’ worship their leader, Virginia.” James picks up his other beverage. “It’s a cult, if you ask me. You’d do best to not talk to anyone, lest you ‘see the light’ while we’re there.”

Matilda shakes her cup, stabbing at the clumped ice with her straw.

“I’m a Scry. Of all people, I know the importance of keeping my communication barriers up.”

James frowns. “Well, just be careful anyway. Things are a little different out there.”

Matilda presses slightly on the sides of her plastic cup, distorting its rim into an oval.

“So, it doesn’t seem likely that Virginia will just hand over her key.”

James lifts his cup to drink but stops. “No… I don’t really think so. There’s only one way we’ll be able to get it from her. I have a plan.”

James grunts while draining the remainder of his cocktail. Matilda matches him, downing the rest of her drink.

A voice over the plane’s intercom announces their descent into Neverland.

#

As James and Matilda exit the jetway, they are greeted at the security gate by two airport employees. Wearing matching uniforms, the fourteen-year-old boy and girl cheerfully smile and bow in unison.

“Welcome, friends, to Neverland! We hope you enjoy your stay and tell your family and networks all about it!”

Grabbing each other’s hands, they skip away from the security gate, humming a playful tune.

Mouth agape, Matilda watches as the children prance down the terminal.

“What… the… actual… *fuck?”*

James chuckles as he makes his way through the security self-check-in gate.

“I told you. This place is weird.”

Even before leaving Babylon, James and Matilda had already determined that subterfuge was going to be their best way into Neverland. Matilda would pose as a Donovan Corporation Executive, and James would play the role of her bodyguard. Committing to his

role, James waits for Matilda to make her way through security, keeping station close beside her.

As they exit the airport, a twelve-year-old boy in a security officer's uniform calls out them.

"Have a great time in Neverland! We hope you like it here so much, you'll want to stay!"

The guard's child-like appearance contrasts harshly with his tactical vest and miniature submachinegun. James looks at the Scry to see her reaction. To her credit, Matilda maintains her composure. Staying calm and polite, she turns to the boy.

"Thank you so much, little sir."

Heading to the taxi pool, James observes a group of men getting out of a cab. Adults aren't an unheard-of sight in Neverland. In fact, the Neverland Acquisitions & Requests Board is extremely aggressive in their marketing and outreach programs throughout the Cyberside. All are welcome to visit. Those who choose to stay get their own proxy child bodies.

What bothers James is the men's uniforms. They indicate the men's allegiance to the Enclave, the powerful organization that controls most of the East Coast. Donovan and Simmons' rivalry is notorious, and the cause of countless deaths in the Cyberside. One of their group notices Matilda and James and motions in their direction to the rest of his companions. The leader of the Enclave band points to James and Matilda.

"What's this, Donovan scum so far from home?"

Fist clenched at his side, James steps in front of Matilda.

The Enclave leader laughs.

"This one has some fight in him. Pretty sure I remember kicking your Tower Boys' asses at the Purge of Salt Lake City. This should be quick."

Matilda places a hand on James tensed arm and steps forward.

"And I seem to remember there's a ceasefire still in effect, you idiot. Not to mention we're on Neverland soil. But by all means – if you want to start something, go for it. Or you can keep on walking, and go back to licking Simmons' boots. Either way is fine by me."

The man's face contorts and reddens but he keeps his distance, and his silence. The Neverland security guard approaches the collective group.

"Is there a problem here, friends? There's nothing more I'd like to do then ensure you all have a pleasant stay…" *But,* his voice doesn't quite add.

His tone is pleasant, but no one can miss the punctuative *click* as the little boy's hand switches the safety off on his toy-sized weapon.

"No problem here," the Enclave leader grumbles, turning to lead

his cohorts into the airport ticketing area.

The Neverland officer gives James and Matilda a final review before heading back to his post. Matilda laughs.

“Oh, man… that was close.”

She heads over to the advancing line of queued taxis. Momentarily dumbstruck, James quickly hustles to catch up.

“But how did—”

Matilda cuts him off, her gaze piercing, her tone serious.

“Know about the Enclave-Babylon treaty? I fought slavers for three months, dude. I might not have any memories of my past, but I am able to pick up on things going now.”

James takes pause at her sudden change in tone, reminding himself that, despite not having access to her own memories, Matilda has consumed the memories of many others.

Her usual upbeat attitude returns as quickly as it has just evaporated.

“But I’m not going to lie. Didn’t think that was actually going to work.” Her mouth morphs into a huge grin. “I honestly thought you might have to punch all those guys out.”

Matilda laughs at the look on James’s face as an indeterminately-teenaged cab driver approaches them.

“Need a lift, ma’am?”

Still grappling with a fit of giggles, she’s just able to get out, “Yes, please.”

The driver pops the trunk and begins loading theirs bags. “Sure thing. Where to?”

Matilda manages to get out “Downtown” as they settle into the car. When the driver gets behind the wheel, he asks again, “Was there a particular hotel you want me to drop you off at?”

Collecting herself, Matilda pretends to shuffle some papers around in the briefcase she’s brought.

“Our meeting isn’t until this evening. Could you recommend a good place to eat? I could really go for some real food after that flight.”

The driver nods and starts the car. “I know a great place. Just sit back and relax, friends.”

Scry and Taciturn exchange a look. So many new ‘friends’, here in Neverland.

The clear, sunny day is a welcome contrast to the smog-laced realm of Babylon. As they make their way into town, they see a few other adults walking around, but there doesn’t appear to be a single resident of Neverland over the age of 18. It’s the cardinal rule of this realm – nobody grows up. James finds it inherently wrong, and not just for the fact that it clearly represents a deviation from the

Cyberside's code. All the friendly attitudes and smiles can't hide the ugly chunks of overridden classes and hacked functions that are all too obvious to his engineer's eyes. To James, this place's relentless cheeriness is an off-putting ruse –a rainbow bandage slapped over a festering wound.

The taxi driver takes them to a small café next to a large, lush, green park. When they step out of the cab, he helps them with their bags and asks, "Would you like me to stick around for a while? I don't mind."

Matilda smiles, but shakes her head. "No, that's okay. I'm sure we'll figure something out. This place looks great."

Nodding, the driver gives them each a thumb ups before reentering the taxi. "Okay, you two have a great time."

They enter the café and are quickly seated at a table in a vacant patio. An apparent 12-year-old waiter arrives with coffee and tea and takes their orders.

As the waiter leaves, Matilda suddenly laughs.

James cocks his head. "What?"

Matilda points to their waiter.

"I don't know. Just the thought of that kid actually being, like, seventy is pretty funny."

James frowns and unfolds his napkin across his lap. Matilda observes a group of children frolicking in the nearby park.

"But you know, James, I kind of get why people could want to live here. It just seems like they don't really have much to worry about."

Taciturn looks up from the table, "Is that right?"

He glances at the children playing in the park. "I'm sure perpetual youth and careless fun would appeal to some, but everything comes at a price."

He tries to think of a good way to explain. "Do you know the story of the Lotophages?"

Matilda furrows her brow. "Uh, I think so. It's a Greek thing, isn't it? I know it has something to do with lotus."

Taciturn pours himself a cup of coffee.

"Yeah, exactly. It's one of the *Odyssey* legends. After a storm, Odysseus and his crew arrived on this island call Djerba. They found a tribe of people who put lotus in everything they ate and drank. It supposedly had a narcotic effect that produced a feeling of calm and apathy. Once Odysseus recognized that, he ordered his crew to leave immediately."

Matilda raises an eyebrow. "Because…?"

James drops two cubes of sugar into his cup.

"When some of the crew tried it, they stop caring about their

journey home. They were content to live on the island forever. Odysseus couldn't allow it."

Matilda selects the tea and adds some cream to it.

"Yeah, but doesn't that lean more toward him just being egotistical? He was upset because they would stop helping him on his quest to get home. He was mostly concerned with how it affected him."

James considers this. "Yeah, okay, sure. Let me reframe it. The crew that tried the lotus, they completely forgot about the rest of the people they were journeying with. Isn't *that* self-centered? Forgetting our responsibilities isn't the same as overcoming them. Would you be content living here in bliss and happiness, if it meant you might never remember who you really are?"

It's Matilda's turn to reflect on Taciturn's words, but their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of their food. Their waiter comes back holding a tray larger than he is. Removing the top, he reveals platters of burgers, fries, eggs, and bacon. James waits until the waiter is out of earshot before commenting.

"I guess when you've hacked yourself to look like a kid, you can eat this stuff all the time."

They dive into their food fervently. After several minutes of silent, focused eating, Matilda asks, "So, since you're an engineer, I have to ask. How exactly did all of this happen?" She gestures to the land of Neverland around them.

James takes a moment to finish his mouthful of food. "Well, it started back in 2018, when social networks became almost a mandatory part of everyday life. It eventually got to the point where people were born, and they already had profiles."

Matilda dips a handful of fries into a generous puddle of ketchup.

"What do you mean? Like, there were laws or something?"

James allows himself a small smile. "Not exactly. The crazy thing is, people did it all themselves. It started with people making funny accounts for their cats or dogs, things like that. Eventually that turned into parents opening accounts for their pregnancies."

Matilda cringes, dropping ketchup-sopped fries back on her plate. "What?"

Nodding, James continues. "Yes, I know. Just hear me out. Parents saw it as fun to open accounts like that, to track the progress of the pregnancies. Once the child was born, social websites acted as a convenient and streamlined way to store all the photos of their child. A digital scrapbook for their kid to look at – or more likely for the parents to look at, when they got older."

Matilda stabs at an over-easy egg, letting its golden yolk spread out across the rest of her plate.

“Uh-huh. So, did you have any?”

The question is a probe into his former life. Not wanting to discuss his son, he arranges a few more strips of bacon onto his plate with unnecessary care and dodges the question when he speaks.

“No. As an engineer, I knew exactly the type of information people were giving away on social sites, mostly without realizing it. I also knew exactly what was being done with the information. On top of that, after joining Fall Water Lake, we were forbidden to have social media accounts.”

Matilda holds her fork up and twirls it in a circle.

“So how did we get… *this?”*

James leans back in his chair and rests his fingers together on his stomach.

“Well, technology progressed until it wasn’t just photos. We got VR/AR panoramas, stereo video, and any other type of media you can think of. It became incredibly addictive.”

Matilda takes another bite of her burger. “So really, it was just like traffic is? The bigger the user base…”

James nods.

“Exactly. Big corporations identified that immediately. The value of the collected data from potential consumers was just too much for them to pass up. They started investing huge resources into buying up the big data.”

Matilda taps her fingers on the table.

“Okay, this is fascinating and all, but what about Neverland?”

James leans forward.

“Yeah, yeah, okay. So, the problem with everyone’s social websites is, no one tells the truth. Every post is carefully crafted to celebrate one’s ego. Essentially… everyone lies. This of course leads to problems with the information that companies were tracking. So, how do you get people to tell the truth?”

James resumes eating his food and talks between bites.

“It all started with what used to be a game. Or rather, a gaming backend, developed out of New York by this company called Octagram. Started by these two hot shots, Ron Staton and Sean Wilcowski.”

Matilda pauses her assault on her burger and looks at James. “Sounds like you knew these guys.”

Her perceptiveness causes James to stop chewing his food. He pauses, swallows, and drinks some water.

“Only casually. Met them a couple of times at conferences. Seemed like good guys. I just think they didn’t truly understand what they had created until after Fall Water had acquired them. But I’m getting ahead of myself.”

James hopes that this lie goes unnoticed. In fact, he knew them very well, but doesn't want to go down that road just yet. He had in fact talked with Ron and Sean extensively, over countless vodka-fueled nights. They had all discussed, *ad nauseam,* the fundamental moral responsibilities of developing powerful, far-reaching tech. He looks at his surroundings, sitting here in the Cyberside – a self-fulfilling prophecy made manifest.

"So, they created this huge multiplayer VR game called *Constellation,* but the big thing was their back-end tech and AI system. The back-end would collect data from players' actions, process it, and restructure their story narratives to fit each user's play style."

Matilda shakes her head. "Okay, you're starting to lose me, chief. Reel it in. Aren't stories literally infinite?"

James skewers a few fries with his fork.

"Combinations are, sure. But dramatic situations are actually pretty finite. There was this writer, George Polti, who said that there are only thirty-six dramatic situations you can break things down to."

Matilda reaches for her water glass but stops. "So, like musical notes. You can come up with an infinite amount of songs, but you're still limited to only the twelve notes that exist."

James slaps the table.

"Exactly! Rob and Sean used this thirty-six situations approach in their game. So, a user would create a character and go through the initial tutorial. Once they leveled up to a certain point, all their actions and decisions would be analyzed and would define their profile. Based on this data, the game would pair them with other players to go on raids and adventures. Meanwhile, the game would be tracking their decisions. This would help define the rest of the necessary data in order to develop a complete understanding of the player's personality. Every raid and adventure would become unique, because the AI would create better, more precise and more engaging scenarios for the party – all of it based on their collective data. Essentially allowing the game to become the most fluid and amazing Dungeon Master imaginable."

Matilda pushes the last remnants of her food around on her plate.

"I still don't get where the social network part comes in."

James pours himself another cup of coffee.

"Yeah, I don't think they did either. Their focus was on making a phenomenal gaming experience, and subsequently, boatloads of cash. What they didn't fully get was that they had built a context metaphorical engine that defined players based on their subconscious decisions instead of their conscious ones. The real value wasn't in crafting the gameplay, but on collecting the data of what people responded to. The experiences were so immersive that people stopped

thinking about lying. There wasn't any payoff in it. They started providing real data that could be effectively analyzed."

Matilda puts down her fork.

"Ahh, okay. I'm picking up what you're putting down. It was getting people to tell the truth."

James nods, snapping his fingers.

"My personal take on where Virginia got all this was when *Constellation* introduced personal domains for players – VR/AR hubs that would adapt and even re-build themselves due to player decisions in the game. You would own real worlds that you could invite other players to. Your personalized virtual world was created by AI, based on the data they had on you. These virtual worlds became more popular than real life, and everyone was spending their time in each other's play spaces. Parents would create them for their kids, where they could go back and watch childhood memories. Eventually, this led to most people already having one before they were even born. It was overwhelmingly popular, and Fall Water acquired the technology and domains from Octogram in 2026 to build their next-generation social network. The one they called *Neverland."*

Matilda looks back out at the children playing in the park.

James pushes his plate away from him. "Yeah. Sorry. Long story for a short question, I know."

The food remaining on Matilda's plate now sits untouched. "So, when did Virginia take this all over?"

James is surprised, even elated, at how much he is genuinely enjoying actually talking at length to someone, anyone. He can't accurately judge how long it has been. The question brings him back around to their purpose here in Neverland. Speaking of such things only calls to mind the executive meeting back at Fall Water Lake, where Virginia had insisted on domain control.

"Virginia locked the central node for herself. What you see in here is a reality of her own construction. Her users willingly revert to these childlike avatars and allow their indexation settings to be changed, for the comfort she gives them."

Matilda looks back at the park filled with playing children. "So… she's pretty much feeding everyone lotus."

James finishes the rest of his coffee. "Pretty much."

James places credits onto the table and stands up.

"This has been nice, but we have a lot of work to do."

#

Finding a safe house in the System isn't too difficult for an

engineer who knows where to look. Developers often leave artifacts behind when they build – like half-finished locations that were never deleted. As James makes his way through the streets of Neverland, he knows of at least one surefire, quick way to locate one, but the process of tracking it can be a jarring ordeal.

As they walk the cobblestoned street, Taciturn examines the coding around them, looking for the telltale signs of an emotion smuggler. Members of the Cyberside's criminal underbelly, such individuals illicitly transport memories from one location to another. Many within the Cyberside compare e-smugglers to Taciturns, largely on account of their shared, active aversion to indexation. James hates the comparison. Taciturns may act as mercenaries, but at least many of their number wander the Cyberside trying to do some level of good. There is not a single quality typical of e-smugglers that James finds redeeming.

In dimly-lit gambling dens and taverns throughout the Cyberside's seedier establishments, those desperate for credits can find the other face of the emotion-smuggling coin – the Extractor, the individual always ready to pay for a prime memory… if the seller is ready to part with that memory forever. Those down on their luck can always sell their remaining euphoric moments to an Extractor who, in turn, transfers the memory from the seller's personal storage to the e-smuggler.

With the product in his own mind, the e-smuggler will transport the goods to wealthy clientele, who will pay handsomely to relive someone else's most cherished moments. The market for positive experiences, especially those from the old world, are considered extremely valuable. The emotion smugglers' business is always in high demand.

But their jobs are fraught with risks. In addition to avoiding all the hurdles of indexation, they also combat the System itself. The System views smugglers as malicious software, and it actively tries to delete them. To avoid the System's defensive mechanisms, they use reality pockets in the code, where they can lay low when the System is particularly hot on their trail.

Activating one of his sensory filters, James walks through the streets of Neverland trying to find any trace of an e-smuggler's recent incursion into this realm. Next to him, Matilda seems to be enjoying the scenery, but James is on edge. To successfully track where any given emotion smuggler has traveled, he'll have to follow the transported memory's wake – something James is reluctant to do. To James, it's like tracking a drug dealer by regularly sampling the trail of cocaine he's accidentally dropped in his path.

James is about to give up on this area of the city, when he

suddenly registers the lingering trace of something in the code – a 40-year-old male, skulking from alley to alley, transporting the memory of a woman. Sighing, James turns to Matilda.

"I think I found what I needed, but if I'm going to do this, I'll need your help. It's going to look like I'm out of it, for a moment. Maybe longer. Just stick close to me, and make sure I don't get lost."

Matilda gives him a toothy grin.

"You got it, Gramps. I'll make sure you don't fall down any manholes."

Rolling his eyes, James closes on the memory's wake and connects to it. His vision changes, blurred as if he is suddenly viewing the world through scored, fogged glass.

James takes a minute to center himself and starts the paused memory.

It starts with a woman holding her son's hand tightly. They are at a station in Babylon, waiting for the next train to arrive. The woman's husband had been fighting in one of the proxy wars between Babylon and the Enclave. Word had arrived that his regiment was attacked by Enclave troops and almost everyone was wiped out. Devastated, she had cried for weeks, barely holding on. Everything changed with a single communiqué. It said survivors were found and were being transported back to the city. The tingling sensation of last-fringe hope fills her as she waits on the platform.

The woman holds her son's small hand tightly. He had insisted on coming, knowing that daddy would be there. Despite her son's confidence, anxiety builds and roils in her stomach as more and more citizens cram onto the platform. She's stricken with dizziness – disoriented by the crush of bodies and the sound of the train entering the station. Her son squeezes her hand.

The mechanical clamor of the train rolling into the station sets off a surge in the sea of people. Everyone pushes their way towards the arriving transport. The train comes to a stop, but the doors do not immediately open. It feels like an anxious eternity on the jam-packed platform. When the train doors finally open, the mob of people boarding fight against the current of passengers disembarking. Frantic, the woman scans the crowd, desperate to catch any glimpse of her husband. Dawning sorrow tears slowly through her as the crowd gradually disperses and the train rolls away.

All at once, the woman notices the absence of the small, fragile hand in her own.

She frantically looks down – her son is not by her side. Confusion quickly gives way to blind panic as the woman runs along the platform. She sees nothing, no sign of her son. The spike of panic now spirals into a gaping hole promising nothing but madness.

That's when she hears it. Her son's voice cries out. *"DAD!"* The woman looks towards the source of the sound, and sees her son tackle the legs of his father. Desperate, she runs to them, but her legs falter with each step, and finally buckle beneath her. She collapses.

She feels two sets of hands embrace her, one much smaller than the other. They smother her with their love and warmth. Tears flow down her face, and theirs. The crippling mixture of worry and grief is now avalanched by relief and joy. Even as the next crowd of people gather on the platform, this family continues to relish the moment of happiness.

Finishing the memory, James' internal sensors have everything they need to track the emotion smuggler's scent. He sees it clearly, wafting through the back alleys into a commercial district up ahead. First, James rubs a moistness from his eyes and takes a deep, shuddering breath. Just a trace of the woman's memory, and the emotions are overpowering. He can only guess what could have possibly made the woman so miserably desperate as to willingly sell this life-altering recollection and remove it from her own storage forever.

Matilda's voice carries over to him, but James doesn't look over to her.

"You okay?", she asks.

James feels his hand clenching and unclenching, beyond his control.

"Yeah, I'm fine." he lies. "Follow me."

To avoid any further inquiry, James immediately starts intently following the emotion smuggler's trail. He does it by instinct, on detached autopilot, but uses the time to regain his composure. The stinging recollection of a family reunited against all apparent odds is too much for him to process right now, too much for him to bear.

Silently, he follows the pulsing trail through switchback alleys and meandering side streets.

It leads him right into the red brick wall of a commercial building.

Matilda speaks up.

"Uh… I don't get it. Is this it?"

With James' engineering eye, he can see the hidden door to the safe-house. He turns to Matilda.

"Yeah. Look… I've got to go in there myself. This isn't the kind of thing you bring a plus-one to."

Matilda shrugs her shoulders and nods

"Yeah, sure. I get it. I'll just hang out around here."

James tries his best to sound casual. "You're not hungry, right?"

Matilda shoots him confused look. "What are you talking about?

We literally *just* ate."

James' hand is flexing of its own accord. He hastily puts it behind his back.

"No, I mean. Have you had any… cravings?" He holds her gaze. "Since Babylon."

Matilda takes a step back and frowns, and Taciturn knows he has said the wrong thing. The ice in Matilda's voice is unmistakable.

"No… I'm fine. Look, just go do your stupid thing in there."

The Scry looks down the alley way and points to a bench.

"If you're so concerned… I'll just grab some tea and sit. Unless you think just sitting will get me into trouble."

James raises his hands defensively.

"Look I didn't mean—"

Matilda's expression contorts into a scowl.

"I said, I'm fine."

Drained from the memory wake, James just doesn't have enough in the tank for this conversation.

"Okay. It shouldn't take long. Just give me 30 minutes. I'll meet you right by that bench just as soon as I can."

Matilda has already started walking away.

"Yeah, sure. Whatever. See you then."

James watches her walk the down alley, hoping his words haven't cut too deep, but a part of him knows that they have. The thought of leaving the Scry alone alarms him.

Turning his attention back to the brick wall, he manipulates the coding to open the hidden door and cautiously enters the safe house.

He's transported through the green, glowing gateway to a small, dirty room that resides both within and outside the confines of Neverland. As a hideout, comfort and cleanliness are not chief among its attributes. He scans the rooms for any current occupants, finding none. While the trace of the e-smuggler remains, the space itself is empty save his own presence. Satisfied, James steps before a large console terminal.

He takes off his jacket, unbuttons his shirt, and tosses them both onto a battered, stained couch. Sitting down at the console, James blows on it, sending up a cloud of dust. As it hangs and drifts in the air around him, James deliberates on what best to create. Console terminals, like this one, give the user a workbench to create powerful new tools within the Cyberside. To end this cult of Virginia's, he needs something that can take her down in one attempt.

In one *shot*.

If someone were closely studying him, he would appear to be sitting, eyes closed, hands going through the muscle-memory motions of typing on a keyboard that does not exist. In the UI behind his eyes,

he accesses the System's armory and his personal weapons files. First, he goes to his bookmarked designs and accesses the blueprints for his trusty pistol. With a few quick selections, his pistol and holster appear next to him inside the safe house. In his list of recent saves, he finds Matilda's arsenal of knives – the deadly weapons she had to surrender before they boarded the plane in Babylon. James smiles, recalling the event: After their meeting with Donovan, when she'd been informed that she couldn't carry them into Neverland, Taciturn had saved their classes to his own armory. He selects them all, and immediately transfers them to his backpack's storage.

With the basics out of the way, James turns his attention to creating something new – to find the right weapon for their current job. He cycles through options.

Too heavy. Not enough penetration power. Too twitchy. He assesses and rejects weapon stats with lighting speed – accuracy, weight, slug velocity, ammunition types, watt-range, stopping power, magazine capacity, and a myriad of—

He stops on one model. And grins.

It's a 50" long behemoth. It looks like a good start, but there are some components that need some tweaks.

His plan is simple. Virginia will stand at the podium for her daily ritual, a pretentious gathering of her subjects. Virginia will address them before the night begins, and she'll bathe in the vanity and devour their adornment. In return, Virginia will spare her followers their unwanted memories, worries, and pains of the past. Before the spectacle unfolds, James will set up position in a vantage point nearby. He'll need to find a building that overlooks Amazement Square. When the timing is right, he'll put a bullet through her head, and secure the key in the ensuing chaos.

He extends each magazine to a 7-round capacity. He opts for the .408 over the .375 rounds. Moving on to the scope, he cycles through options and settles on the Valdala 12-52x56 40mm Terminator, a masterpiece among scopes. He pauses when looking at an advanced ballistics computer. Normally he wouldn't need additional assistance, but just in case the System throws some inclement weather at him, he adds the KESTREL 4000 meteorological and environmental-sensor package.

Matilda can hold the perimeter of his sniper nest, in case somebody tries to interrupt him.

Crafting a weapon in the System is more of an art than a science. The shape of the weapon morphs with his thoughts as he applies each new subtle modification. With everything attached, it still feels a bit heavy, so he places in a couple of code modules to adjust the physics of the weapon. He trims needless bulk, lightening the rifle to 15

pounds without losing any of his mods. For the rounds, he does ballistics tweaking. With a few lines of code, James renders the rounds untraceable by standard detection systems, which will allow him to rain down invisible death on his targets.

What lies in front of him when he finishes is an exquisite and deadly weapon forged with a specific intended mission, built from scratch by an engineer to be stored in his arsenal. The final step is to give the new weapon a name for storage and filing. It comes to him without pause, one word.

Restoration.

When he keys the label, the weapon class goes live and the lights in the room flicker, as a new unique entity manifests in the world. The new object is compiled and connected to all the elements of the architecture, acquiring a unique index and signature. Alphanumerics and properties fused together by the will of a man who sits at a workbench, exhausted and satisfied.

As the lights go back to normal, he picks up Restoration and hefts the weapon appreciatively.

“Ok girl, time to make me proud.”

A click of Restoration’s action answers in eagerness to perform.

Chapter 12: “Delusions”

Matilda sits on the park bench, and she can’t shake the feeling that it’s going to rain soon. A dark-cloud chill forms in the air, and she can feel her mood deteriorating with the weather. At lunch, she really enjoyed talking with James. Granted, once he started talking, he dominated the discussion – but Matilda was happy to get more than just the usual few words out of him.

Why he had to bring *that* up is another matter.

Exasperated, Matilda lurches up from the bench. With the change in weather, a warm cup of tea sounds perfect, and it doesn’t take long to find a coffee house.

After ordering a peppermint tea from a 12-year-old barista, Matilda already feels her spirits lifting. The heat of the cup warms her hands, and the first swallow of the drink invigorates her body. She takes her place again on the bench and watches a group of children playing in the nearby park. Kids swarm on and about the swings, monkey bars, and teeter-totter like joyful, hyperactive ants. Matilda’s joyful smile slowly wanes into a frown.

What kind of child was she, she wonders, in the real world? Who were her parents? Did they love her? Is her smile more like that of her father, or her mother?

Lost in her own thoughts, Matilda doesn’t even notice the first few drops of rain.

Placing her teacup on the bench, Matilda walks toward the playground. She makes her way through the flocks of children, beneath the jungle-gym bars, past the slide all beading with droplets in the light drizzle. Eying her approach curiously, some of the children clear a path as Matilda plops herself down onto one of the rubber-seated swings. Within seconds, she is alternately leaning back and kicking forward, increasing her speed on the swing, letting out a joyful laugh. Part of her feels stupid and childish, but her euphoria takes over and intensifies. At the height of her arcing swing she nimbly dismounts, clearing the vicinity of the swing-set in a graceful jump, nailing the landing. The rain begins falling a little harder.

The children on the playground run for shelter as the shower increases in strength. Alone, Matilda dances and laughs in the welcome raindrops, stepping around the forming puddles like the little girl she imagines but can’t remember. Her laughter stops abruptly as Matilda suddenly registers the now-empty park around her.

Running back to the swing set, Matilda leans back on the seat, gripping the slick chains tightly, desperately trying to recapture the sensation that’s now rapidly draining away. As rain trickles down

Matilda's face, it begins to mix with the tears running down her cheeks. The empty playground is filled with her quiet sobbing and the creaking of empty swings.

Finally, Matilda opens her eyes, but does not see the playground or Neverland. It has been replaced with a green pasture. The swing she sits in is now a wooden-seated one, suspended by worn but stout ropes from a large oak tree. The city's buildings have been replaced by a single house in the distance. The sodden ground around her bristles and dances with the heavy rain.

Matilda can't shake the feeling that she's been here before. Wiping her tears away, she is startled to find herself closely regarding the delicate hands of an 11-year-old. Her business suit has been replaced with a small, green dress and her feet now wear red sandals. Despite the increasing downpour, all the pain and fear she felt is gone. The world around her no longer feels artificial or out of place.

Cutting through the muted roar of rain, Matilda hears a female voice calling from the house.

"Tilda, darling, you're all wet, dear. Come home quickly, before you catch a cold."

It takes Matilda a few seconds before she can manage a reply.

"M… mom?"

In a flash, she's off the swing and sprinting to the building. The silhouette of a woman in a white dress stands at the doorway and motions for her to run faster. Channeling what strength she can, Matilda pushes herself to close the distance between her and the house. With each step, Matilda desperately tries to make out the features on the woman's face. Her small feet struggle to move through the slippery grass, and it seems that the harder she runs, the farther the house gets from her. The rain gains intensity, now coming down in sheets, in torrents. With her vision distorted, Matilda trips over a rock that sends her sprawling to the wet ground. Crying, wet, and in pain, Matilda has never felt this powerless before. Everything around her seems to darken. Matilda cries out in despair.

"Momma!"

Warm, gentle hands lift Matilda up from the grass and muck. Matilda looks up to a woman in white, smiling down at her and wiping away her childish tears. The woman's soothing presence fills Matilda with a confidence and love she can't remember ever having experienced.

"Come on darling, no need for tears. This is a happy day. I've been waiting for you for so long. I thought I'd lost you."

Tears still cascade down Matilda's face, but she finds herself smiling with pure joy, any thoughts of sadness instantly banished. Soothed. Healed.

“I’m so sorry, momma. I never want to leave you again.”

Smiling in return, the woman in white bends down to hug Matilda. She brushes the wet hair away from Matilda’s face.

“Don’t worry, my love. Don’t worry. We’re together now, and nothing will separate us again. Let’s go home.”

The rain stops as Matilda puts her tiny hand into the woman’s warm, welcoming clasp. They walk together towards the house in the distance.

Back in the playground, Virginia Willis, ruler of Neverland, walks in the direction of Amazement Square, holding the hand of an 11-year-old girl who resembles Matilda.

#

Exiting the emotion smuggler’s hideout, James can sense that something isn’t right. The wet cobblestone is evidence of recent rainfall. Nothing strange about that in itself… but an unsettling knot forms in his stomach just the same. Cautiously, he approaches the park bench that was chosen by Matilda. He finds nothing but a single soggy paper cup.

He scans the nearby shops for Matilda, hoping to see an adult amongst the children. Certainly she took shelter from the rain. Unable to spot her, James sits down on the bench. His thoughts are anxious, ill-formed. Unwelcome.

“Lost something?” a voice to his left inquires, politely.

James instinctively reaches for his pistol, but abruptly stops as he sees the source of the voice. A middle-aged man sits on the bench. Close enough to touch without fully extending his arm. Taciturn curses himself for letting someone sneak up on him. He quickly sizes up the stranger, his hand still frozen at one flap of his unzipped jacket.

Dressed in jeans, brown work boots, a vintage 90’s-era shirt – a *Double Dragon* video game print – and a black cap, the man is clearly just visiting Neverland. What most catches James’ attention is the man’s eyes. James feels like he’s seem them before. The notion is queerly unsettling.

Acknowledging what the Taciturn was reaching for, the man puts both of his hands up in affable surrender.

“No need for any of that, young man. Just trying to help.”

James feigns patting his jacket for his smokes instead. The delayed gesture seems false even to him, but he commits to it anyway. The man chuckles.

“I think you’re out. Here, have one of mine.”

Keeping one hand in the air for a moment and producing a pack

of Lucky Strikes with the other, he offers the pack's opened end to the Taciturn.

James regards the man for another prolonged moment. The pack his questing hand has found is empty anyway. Taciturn reaches for the extended pack, extracts a cigarette, and examines it.

"I'm looking for someone. A friend of mine. She was supposed to be here."

The man chuckles again, lighting first James's cigarette and then his own. They both take long, deep pulls.

"Hmm. I see. It wouldn't happen to be a young woman in a business suit, by chance?"

James turns his body to face the stranger. Feeling a desperation taking hold, he ignores his standing policy of avoiding engagement with strangers.

"Yes, have you seen her?" It sounds casual enough to his own ears.

The man lets out a streamer of smoke and nods his head.

"I have, in fact."

He gestures in the direction of the playground.

"Seems she was making rather merry with the children over there. Trying to recapture her youth, you ask me." The stranger contemplates the city around them. "But I guess that's the point of this whole place, isn't it? Only problem is, when you're desperate to see something it's easy to get fooled, wouldn't you say?"

James shakes his head. "Not this woman. I don't believe she'd get swept up in all this bullshit."

The stranger shrugs his shoulders, "Perhaps you're right." He starts to move his cigarette to his mouth but stops. "Unless, of course, she had a little push." The cigarette finishes its journey. Its tip glows.

Taciturn goes for his own, but it has gone out. Flicking it into the wet street, he finds the stranger offering him another. As he accepts it, he already knows the answer to *who* did the pushing.

"Where'd Virginia take her?"

The man offers another shrug. "Where do all kids go, when they're done playing? Home. To their mother, to forget about all of the day's troubles."

James looks around to see the few remaining citizens of Neverland, closing their shops and moving in the same direction. To Amazement Square.

"But Matilda's not one of *them*…"

The strange man's face turns solemn.

"Not when you left her, maybe." The man gazes grimly towards the town center. "I'd hurry, if I were you. There are some things you can't come back from. Once someone finds a new home, they begin to

let go of their past. And when someone doesn't have a past to remember, it's a lot easier to let go."

James is already on his feet, tossing his cigarette away.

"I can't let that happen."

The man cocks his head.

"For her sake, or yours?"

James stops and turns to the man on the bench, his own anger catching him off guard. "What is that supposed to mean?"

The old man takes another puff of his cigarette and follows the trail of smoke as it rises into the cold air.

"Nothing… or everything, depending on how you look at it. When a person's desires overcome their reason, they can justify their actions to whatever end. It takes only a slight nudge for someone to turn into a monster."

The man's serious face softens. "Or maybe that's just the ramblings of an old man. Good luck, James."

Taciturn starts walking, then running, towards the distant buildings. It takes him another few moments to register that the stranger just called him by name. Looking back at the bench, James finds it empty – only a faint cloud of smoke lingers in the air.

Pushing the man from his thoughts, James rushes to Amazement Square.

#

As the sun sets on Neverland, the blue sky and red sun mingle in their ritual chromatic dance. The day's dying light casts the city in a soft fleeting glow before the oncoming darkness. Slowly, the creatures of the night start making their voices heard. crickets and frogs chirp and croak in their nightly chorus. It occurs to James that, under normal circumstances, he would find the view breathtaking. With the mission at hand, however, he finds the sight oppressive, somehow ghoulish. As he races up the street towards Amazement Square, distant bells start ringing. James feels his hand flexing, feels a dizziness in his forehead. The bells continue, and the sensation increases. He slows, stops, and reaches out to brace himself against a nearby wall.

And another memory claws its way up from where he's buried it.

Sunset and bells – both filling the evening that he first met the woman he would marry, Sarah. James was at his friend Sam's wedding at the Santa Barbara Zoo. He was one of the groomsmen, she knew the bride. At the reception, they found themselves talking at the same table. Sarah was fascinating, well-traveled, educated, and down

to earth. Stricken with her personality, James counted himself lucky to successfully land a few jokes. Sarah's laugh was infectious. As the reception started winding down, James stepped away to have a smoke, and she joined him. They started another conversation and spent an hour talking by themselves, sitting on a bench next to a family of giraffes.

Taciturn shakes the memory out of his head. *No, damn it. Not now.*

Pushing himself harder still, James scrambles through a maze of streets to a building he hopes will work as his sniper tower. The bells continue to ring out. It's a ringing that reverberates in his head, drowning out his thoughts, tormenting his mind. And still the memory intrudes, persists.

After the wedding, Sarah went back to her home on the East Coast, and James went to Europe to consult on AI development. Engrossed in his work, James forgot about that magical night. But nine months later, he received a message through a business networking site. Sarah was attending the same conference in San Francisco and wanted to know if he'd like to meet up. As the memories of that wedding came back to him, demurral wasn't even an option. Sarah was already waiting for him on the 39th floor of the Marriott, looking out over the city from The View Lounge. With its vast hemispherical window-wall overlooking downtown and the bay beyond, the lounge struck James as the lair of some moneyed Bond villain. Standing there with the sunset and the city behind her, she was as beautiful as James remembered – more so, if that were possible. It was at this moment that James knew this would not just be a casual meetup. He was destined to spend the rest of his life with this woman. But it was a life that ended when the old world died.

James stops, drawing in ragged breaths, and repeatedly slams the palms of his hands against his temples, as if to hammer the memories into submission, back to where they cannot torment him. He looks around and makes his unsteady way to the door at the base of the tower. Seeing no one around – knowing he would not care if there were – James smashes it open. The bell's chiming is louder and more intrusive than ever. James sprints up the stairs two at a time to the roof, and still the bell continues its incessant clamor. With each brain-rattling gong, he sees faces from the past. *GONG*. Sarah. *GONG*. Tim. *GONG*. Stephen.

James' head is throbbing by the time he gets to the roof. The bells have stopped, now replaced by growing chants and cheering.

Breathing hard, moving towards the direction of the sounds, Taciturn reaches the edge of the roof and kneels. He has a perfect view of Amazement Square below. Shifting to his backpack, he opens

up its digital inventory. Selecting Restoration, he pulls the large rifle out of the bag. Flipping open the tripod and turning on the camouflage module, James tries to slow the rate of his breathing, the rapid beat of his heart.

Calm and void. Calm and void.

The cool night breeze ruffles his hair as James lies down. Placing the rifle's tripod on the edge and balancing the weapon in his hands, the Taciturn turns on the rangefinder.

Eying the scope, he scans the celebration for his target. Virginia.

Taciturn sweeps his view from one Neverland citizen to the next. It isn't hard to find the woman that towers over the hacked children's avatars. Readjusting, he is already making his final calculations when his mouth opens in silent shock. Standing next to Virginia is the focus of the crowd's excitement.

It's an 11-year-old Matilda.

#

Matilda clasps her mother's hand tightly as they make their way across the wet grass towards the large house. Its grand columned, colonial architecture welcomes them with open doors. Entering the colonnade hall together, Matilda's dirty, wet dress is transformed into a regal gown. A crowd of children already occupy the adjoining hall, and their excitement grows once she crosses the threshold. Almost all extend their hand with a cheery thumbs-up, and many are taking pictures of her and her mother. A slight hysteria is brewing, but the overall atmosphere is one of friendship and celebration.

Matilda looks up at her mother, "Who are they?"

Squeezing Matilda's hand gently, her mother says "These people, darling, are all of your friends. See how excited they are, that you're finally home?"

Matilda gawks at the cheering, gesticulating crowd. "Oh."

Gently, her mother continues. "Cheer up, sweet thing. This is a special occasion. You've returned to me, my love. There's something special planned for tonight. Something that will make you very happy."

As they pass through the onlookers, the crowd parts before them, and closes in their wake. By this point, children start chanting her name – quietly at first, but as Matilda passes a huge poster reading ***Welcome back, Matilda!***, the chanting becomes a tumult, an uproar. Hundreds of TV screens surround them, streaming the same image of her and her mother, now approaching a pedestal. When they arrive at the stand, a flurry of colorful balloons launch into the air. As they

ascend to the ceiling, the screens start flicking through a series of photos of her and her mother over the years. On each image, Matilda can see little hearts and comments popping on the screen – each one testimony of Neverland's collective, adoring love for her. She is the center of attention for an entire realm.

Matilda doesn't remember the pictures at first, but as the images flash on the screens in a slideshow, they take on ever more reassuring familiarity. Matilda's birth. Learning how to ride a bike, with her mother close by. Tear-filled first days of school. Class projects they worked on together. It's all coming together, and fills Matilda with an abiding sense of love and safety. Of being special. Of being wanted. Matilda has a family, a home… and *memories.* The feelings inside her shine, blossom, overwhelm – and she wants to share them. With everyone in the Cyberside.

#

Virginia ascends the podium, holding Matilda's small hand. James looks on in shock. In place of her strong, confident face is now that of a timid, guileless child. That image of Matilda is projected on every screen around Amazement Square.

Placing his eye back to the scope, James exhales and steadies himself.

Calm and void. Calm and void.

Scanning the celebration, he notes the presence of several conspicuous guards. Childlike forms notwithstanding, these guards are men, with hard experience. Heavily armed, they survey the crowd. And, doubtless, scan the rooftops intently.

Keeping a hand on the rifle's grip, Taciturn pulls out spare magazines from his bag and places them within quick reach. Moving the rifle the merest trifle of a degree, he settles the crosshairs on Virginia's head. Taking a moment to stabilize himself, James lets the air out of his lungs. James moves his finger to the trigger.

In the crystal resolution of the scope, Neverland's Queen looks directly at Taciturn and smiles.

Shaking her head, Virginia lifts the hand that holds Matilda's. James only now sees the blue static light, flickering faintly around the woman's hand and around Matilda. A lifesync connection. If Virginia dies, Matilda goes with her.

"Fuuu*uck.*"

James knows when a trap has been placed. And this one was set in motion the moment they entered Neverland.

Still grasping Matilda's right hand with her left, Virginia raises it

and gives a thumbs-up of her own. The entire crowd follows suit. Cheering and repeating the gesture, the throng's excitement becomes deafening. After another moment basking in their revelry, Virginia waves her hand. The mob, as one, goes silent. The Neverland queen proudly regards her people.

"Children! Every evening we gather here to share in the warmth and love of our family. Every one of you is dear to me, and to your brothers and sisters. But today is a special day for all to celebrate."

Virginia raises another thumb to the sky and the crowd repeats the gesture in unison, cheering loudly. Virginia beams down at Matilda standing next to her.

"Please, I would like you to meet Matilda, my new daughter and your new sister. She is back home among us, after being lost for so long. She was searching, and she has found her way back to us."

The crowd cheers again as the screens change to different images of areas throughout Neverland. Widespread gatherings of citizens have formed their own celebrations. As the merriment continues, Virginia smirks and looks up at Taciturn's location.

"But I must say that she hasn't come alone. Our precious lamb has brought a wolf to our gates."

The crowd's excitement turns to anger. As one, they turn and glare at where Virginia's gaze is focused. James recoils from the sight of everyone staring at him. When the guards start moving in his direction, Taciturn quickly puts his eyes back on the scope.

Before he can fire, Virginia yells out to her soldiers.

"No, don't. There is no need."

She lets out a victorious giggle.

"He cannot harm us now. No evil can overcome the power of the love that holds us together. As a family!"

She gives another thumbs-up and the crowd reciprocates. Thumbs in the air, they all start moving rhythmically, in unison. In thrall. Their leader continues, "So let us rejoice in our unity, and accept my new daughter into our circle."

Virginia kneels next to Matilda, and the crowd starts chanting the girl's name. Crosshairs trained on Virginia, Taciturn rests his finger on the trigger, his pulse thudding in his temples, in his hand. As the chanting continues, he slowly traverses his aim to Matilda. The crowd's chanting is deafening, a pandemonium.

James can barely finish a single thought. Would Matilda prefer death over slavery to this world of illusions? Or is there even now a part of her that secretly longs for this – longs to find a home, whatever the cost?

And can I still get into the Triangle without her? he wonders, and instantly despises the thought.

Looking deeply into Matilda's wide eyes, Virginia now holds both of Matilda's small hands in her own. The crowd's rhythmic chanting lowers, almost disappears in a tuneless, mindless humming as the citizens of Neverland communally connect with the spirit of their mother. Blue light flickers around them as the lifesync dances from Virginia's to Matilda's hand. A similar blue flicker forms above the heads of all those in the crowd and all those on the display screens.

Virginia utters an impassioned whisper, but in the new, near-mesmeric silence of the night, it sounds like thunder. "Open to me, my daughter, come…"

Matilda nods her head.

James finger twitches, measureless micrometers off the trigger. His body's muscle memory knows what to do, but something within him resists.

Cursing, James moves his trembling hand away from the rifle.

Unable to look away, James watches the Scry and the Neverland leader on the platform. Matilda finally answers. In the terribly-clear magnification, he can read her lips.

"Of course."

Virginia grins in triumph, but James now registers a familiar smile creep across Matilda's face as well. He watches in confusion as a flickering red flame appears above Matilda's head. Dancing across the child-Scry's body, it sweeps across their tightly-clasped hands and up Virginia's arms. Reaching the ruler's head, the flame consumes Virginia's blue.

Gripping Virginia's hand tightly Matilda whispers, "But I'm not your daughter."

Virginia's eyes widen. She screams in horror as the red flame flares and erupts in a sudden inferno over her blue form.

Taciturn quickly gets his finger back on the trigger and shifts his aim to the first of the Neverland guards. As Matilda struggles with Virginia, he begins his own fight. Controlling his breathing, Taciturn finally lets Restoration sing.

It's a hymn of death for Virginia's guards, as some scramble for the platform, as still others shoot blindly in his direction. The mercenary doesn't give them much of a chance as Restoration's .408 rounds scream down on them, into them, through them, sending their bodies flying. Every shot sends data-blood fanning out into the panicked crowd. The throng seems desperate to break out of the square, but the lifesync with their mother anchors them in place.

Taciturn only stops his slaughter to momentarily watch the Scry and the Queen of Neverland conclude their struggle. Matilda is absorbing the power and memories of everyone connected to Virginia, as the red flame spreads. In the crowd, horrified awareness starts

dawning on citizens as they flicker between their chosen child avatars and their true, elderly forms, aging decades in seconds as the System efficiently readjusts the years of hacking and cheating. A black nexus forms around Matilda as more memories pour into her. The void consumes every true memory from the crowd. The Scry has become a channel between them and the great abyss. One by one, as everything that was within them is ripped out, they become nothing but dust and the echoes of screams

Restoration's chorus is briefly paused again as Taciturn slams a fresh magazine into the rifle. He is gunning down old men now, but their adjusted forms don't make them any less dangerous. A single near miss whizzes past his head, fluttering his eardrum. Far more frenzied, inaccurate hails of return gunfire randomly chip concrete far away to each side as stray rounds slam into the building around him, most well below him, a rare few behind him. Taciturn barely pays the return salvos a second thought. Their standard-issue weapons are hopelessly outclassed by Restoration's punishing power and range.

He scans for more targets, but finds nothing but a dusty courtyard, the strewn bodies of felled guards, and Matilda still locked in a struggle with an aged, dying Virginia. Placing Restoration back in his pack's inventory, Taciturn picks himself up from the shell-covered ground and makes his way to the stairs.

#

Stepping over the bodies of fallen guards and filmed dust, James approaches the podium. Carefully, he pries Matilda's hands from Virginia's. With the bond broken, both women collapse. Virginia falls to the floor. Matilda collapses into Taciturn's arms.

"Easy there, Matilda. It's over. Time to stop."

Matilda blinks her solid black eyes and they slowly return to normal. She looks around dazed, as if waking from a long, deep sleep. Seeing James, she nods her head but her voice jitters and croaks.

"I'm… I'm okay. I just need a minute."

Reverting back from her proxy child body, Matilda sits down on the podium's edge and buries her face in her hands. James tries to think of an encouraging word but can't. Instead, he looks down at the wrinkled, ruined body of a person he once knew in a different life. Virginia's motherly aspect has been discarded, revealing her true form.

"How could you let this get so far out of hand, Virginia? What happened to you?"

Piercing blue eyes glare back at him. "You're an asshole, James,

you know that? You really planned all of this just to get to me?"

Taciturn looks back at Matilda. The Scry stares blankly out at the open courtyard now filled with information dust. James wonders if the Scry had planned this all along. And, and if so, why she didn't tell him.

"It didn't have to go this way. We just wanted your key."

James says the words but surveys the carnage of the courtyard. He thinks about Restoration, sitting in his inventory. He thinks about what he had very nearly done with it.

Virginia tries to laugh, but it turns into a gurgling cough. Spitting fluids out of her mouth, she replies, "My key… I never liked you James, but I always thought you were one of the smart ones. That's why I don't understand why you'd make a deal with that prick, Donovan."

Taciturn grimaces at the accusation, "It's only temporary."

Virginia tries to laugh again. "You know what they say: 'You deal with shit, you're going to smell like it.' At least I can go knowing he's using you."

James' hand begins clenching and unclenching. "He's not using us."

She coughs again, weaker this time. "Sure. Sure, James. Whatever you have to tell yourself."

Frowning, James scans Virginia's body until he finds what they came here for. Virginia's key is in the form of a leather bracer attached to her wrist. James starts to take it off, but Virginia's hand grabs his arm with a sudden, surprising strength.

"If you give it to that monster over there, you'd better know what you're doing."

James' expression causes Virginia to launch into another fit of painful laughter, punctuated with harsh, wracking, dying coughs.

"I take back what I said about you being smart, James." She rests her head on the floor of the podium and stares up at the evening sky. "Well if you don't know, that *thing* will, soon enough."

His blank look only makes Virginia laugh, and thus cough, all the harder.

Troubled, James asks, "What the hell do you mean?"

Virginia can no longer manage a laugh, but her grimacing smirk is raw condescension.

"For Christ's sake, James. She just massacred a *city*. With that amount of people's memories, someone must have at least seen an image of her before we all transferred."

James notices Matilda rocking back and forth. "Wait, so you know who she is?"

Virginia's voice is weak, faltering. "Of *course* I fucking do. That's

why I assumed I could get in her head."

James pleads, "Virginia. You have to—"

She cuts him off by spitting more of her lifeblood at him. With her end approaching, she's only able to drool it on herself.

"Blow me, you piece of shit."

And with that, the last breath leaves her. Virginia's body becomes still.

Eyes focused on nothing, James finally gets up and collects a catatonic Matilda in his arms. He carries the Scry through the now-vacant domain of Neverland. It seems every citizen of Neverland was connected to Virginia's big celebration. As they reach the edge of the city, Matilda shifts her weight and pushes herself out of his arms. Standing up, Matilda shakes off the accumulated dust filming her clothes.

"So, where to next, Gramps?" she asks.

James lets the cheery bravado slip, hoping it's a sign of her old self.

"With Neverland down, there's no transportation lines available. We'll have a lot of walking ahead of us."

Matilda snorts. "Back to your old 'dodging the question' self, I see."

Taciturn prepares a counter but thinks better of it.

"Delaware. We need to go to Delaware. Hank Brown has the next key."

Matilda tightens her lips. Taciturn cannot read the expression it creates. "Can I see Virginia's?"

Taciturn moves alongside her and hands her Virginia's bracer. As the Scry's hands grab it, James turns Virginia's words of warning over in his mind.

The moon's light reflects off the bracer in Matilda's hand. "Huh… all that, for just *this."*

They walk in silence for a few minutes before Matilda speaks again.

"I'm assuming you knew this Hank dude. Like you knew Virginia."

James looks forward at the road ahead.

"Yeah. He actually used to be a friend of mine, back at Fall Water. Ran the R&D department and dealt with most of our third-party developers."

For a while, they continue in silence. Finally, Matilda asks, "How would you describe him?"

James thinks of his old friend – it's a complicated question. The only correct answer is significantly simpler. "He's gone batshit crazy."

Matilda lets out a single laugh. "We've already met a sleazy ruler

in Babylon and a deranged cult-leader in Neverland, and *Hank* is the crazy one. Great."

Despite the sarcasm, James reflects that it's the first he's heard her laugh in a long time.

They continue down the road in silence.

As night reigns over the eerily silent Neverland, a wind rises, howling through the city streets. It sweeps billowing clouds of information dust into the air. Lights in the city start to flicker off – street lamps, apartment windows, stores. As buildings start to age and crumble, the tower bell from Amazement Square falls to the ground and shatters. Wild grass breaks through the asphalt and cobblestone, while bushes and trees expand, overflowing into areas humans traveled heavily just hours before. The System claims an empty realm from inhabitants that perverted its code. Taking back what belongs to it. Making things right.

Chapter 13: “The Road”

James and Matilda walk side by side along Interstate 60 from Neverland towards Richmond. The inhabitants they’ve passed in the quiet, green landscape have been a random sheep or two. In the early years of the Cyberside, the surrounding cities of Scotsville and Amherst were full of people. Now they remain empty – silent, eternal mausoleums to the causalities of the First Traffic War. The derelict cities remind James of the bloody conflict and his involvement in it.

At the time, James had hoped he could avert disaster through his technical prowess. Gathering former colleagues from his tech department, they banded together and formed a society to safeguard the Cyberside. Creating a knightly order, they fancied themselves the digitalized incarnation of the Knights Templar. Together, they would protect whichever pilgrims they chanced upon on the road, ever secretly fixing critical issues within the System using their extensive engineering knowledge. Despite their good intentions, their idealistic vision soon fell before the harsh reality. In the end, humanity’s problematic nature was less fixable than any technical issues they had ever planned for.

The First Traffic War was the first major harbinger of the horrors humankind could inflict upon itself in the digital world. Vast tracts of Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Maryland became conflict zones when the fighting between the Triangle Alliance and the East Coast Enclave began. While Neverland remained neutral and unaffected, the other regions were not so lucky. As the war over influence and traffic raged on, the populations were caught between violence and the early forms of slavery that would soon manifest rampantly throughout the Cyberside.

Seeing the horrors and drastic alteration to the System’s code, James’ knightly order – calling themselves Taciturns – stepped in as best they could. Their hope was to stem the tide of destruction and code alteration, but their numbers were too few to make any significant difference between the warring factions. Before long came the System’s first regional shutdown. In the blink of an eye, Maryland ceased to exist. All of the area’s inhabitants found themselves in new zones, the landmass having simply disappeared. Finally comprehending the potential consequences of their actions, both the Enclave and the Triangle entered an uneasy armistice. The Triangle shut its doors completely, erected massive walls along its borders, and turned North Carolina into an impenetrable, isolated realm. Rumors began spreading of the experiments being run behind those walls, but reliable news first slowed to a trickle, then stopped altogether.

With their own ranks dwindling, the Taciturn Order gathered for one last time. Disbanding, they would concentrate on preserving themselves, and retaining and honing their base of advanced engineering knowledge. As solitary nomads, they would each seek to address what they could handle – local issues and the containment of monstrous anomalies. Over the years, James lost touch with most of his fellow Taciturns. Many died, while still others strayed from the path. When a handful gathered to tackle the Bakersfield Incident, James learned that some of their original order had tried to enter the Triangle, convinced that the answers to fix everything were hidden there. No one was ever heard from, and chaos within the Cyberside continued.

Now, reluctantly, James finds himself on a similar path, traversing old battlegrounds and heading to an area of Cyberside which, by the evidence, no one returns from.

And he does it all in the company of a Scry.

James laughs inwardly and grimly at what his other Taciturns would say if they knew. With two more keys to go, James wonders if he'll get the chance to learn what happened to his Taciturn brothers and sisters that ventured into the Triangle.

#

With rapid communication lines either down or closely monitored, James insists they stick to a slower method. They walk down an empty highway, traversing an entire indexation zone before James decides it's safe to set up camp. When they finally stop, Matilda's physical exhaustion is on a par with her mentally haggard state.

With their camp set up in the woods, Matilda rests next to a warm, crackling fire. She lies on her back, looking up at the emulation of the night sky. With her eyes, she traces the digital flow of information, flickering on the background of black. The strange anomalies she detects and catalogs serve as cold reminders of what she herself truly is. A particularly-anomalous, localized error in a greater, already-corrupted world.

Frowning, she rolls onto her side toward the Taciturn. In the warm glow of the firelight, James intently cleans his pistol.

Matilda asks, "What are these… holes in the sky? Were they engineered for a reason?"

James pauses in his work.

"Huh?"

Taciturn glances up at the horizon-to-horizon sprawl of the

skybox.

"Oh… those were intended to be stars, but when the first war started, the System turned them off. So much processing was needed for the destruction the Enclave and Triangle were inflicting on each other, that it viewed stars as a wasted expenditure of energy. I guess it never switched them back on."

Despite the darkness, Matilda notices the unhappiness in his eyes.

"Sounds like you miss them."

Taciturn offers a wan smile.

"A little, sure. It makes you wonder how many other things, amazing or not, that the System stopped supporting – because people were too focused on other things. Why do you ask?"

Matilda sits up, hugging her knees.

"I don't know. It just seems weird that people would build something to live in that would just make decisions like that for them. I'd never want to give something that much power. It's like people just gave up, without caring. You know what I mean?"

Taciturn nods.

"Yeah, well. People have been doing *that* for a long time."

James resumes cleaning his weapon.

"We're constantly sacrificing things as we evolve as a species. City life meant sacrificing the skills we learned in the wild. Technology meant sacrificing much of our natural – our physical – movement. Comfort and convenience obviated all our problem-solving faculties. We'd build a house, but destroy everything around it. It's weird and a little sad, but it's something humans do to survive."

Taciturn takes up a long stick and pokes the fire to stoke it.

"I don't know. Maybe there's some irony to it. To save ourselves from extinction, we completely gave up on our world."

Matilda watches James intently as he continues to stare deeply into the fire. He doesn't say anything, and Matilda doesn't intrude on his concentration.

After a prolonged silence, Taciturn blinks and looks around the campsite. "Let's get some sleep, Matilda. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

Matilda lays down again, staring down the holes in the sky.

"Oh, great. Translation: 'More walking'."

#

They reach Richmond by midday. Despite being exhausted, Taciturn doesn't want to stay long. Ideally, he'd like to skirt Richmond altogether, but there's something in the city they need – a resupply

storehouse he set up during the war. It's a cache he hopes is still intact after all this time.

After leading Matilda into a back alley, Taciturn opens the doors to a graffiti-covered storage unit. As the doors creak open, James is relieved to see the old azure-blue Cadillac he left in the location's inventory. He also finds a weapon cache he'd forgotten about and adds its contents to his backpack's inventory.

Opening the driver's seat, he motions for Matilda to hop in, but as he tries starting the car, the engine fails to turn over. Refusing to meet Matilda's pointed look, Taciturn tries again. Nothing. Smiling, Matilda walks over to the hood of the car.

"Pop it," she says.

"It's been sitting idle for a while. I just need to—"

Rolling up her sleeves, Matilda says again, "Pop the hood, Gramps."

Sighing through slightly-clenched teeth, James activates the release and the Scry disappears behind the raised hood. Within moments, James is alarmed by the sounds of her tinkering. "Wait, don't touch anything."

Her voice comes from the other side of the propped-up hood, sounding like she is holding a tool in her teeth. "I know what I'm doing."

After a minute, the hood slams down to reveal Matilda wiping her hands on her pants. She moves to the passenger seat. With a tiny smirk, she nods to his hand on the ignition key. "Try it again."

James starts to unbuckle his seat belt, gripping the door release. "What did you—"

"For Christ's sake, just try it!"

Yielding, James turns the key – and the car roars to life. Matilda slouches comfortably back in the passenger seat and puts her feet up on the dashboard, exasperatingly pleased with herself.

"It's okay, James. I'll be your Chewbacca."

Thin-lipped, James pulls the car out of the garage and mutters, "R2-D2 was the one that fixed the Falcon."

As the Cadillac rolls down the wide, monument-adorned avenue, Matilda looks out the window at the passing houses and landscape. James glances over at her. Despite her quips, questions and sporadic smiles, James has noticed something off about her since Neverland. Virginia's final words about the Scry still gnaw at him.

"I don't think I was poor," Matilda says.

Her words catch him off guard. "What?"

Matilda continues to look out the window at the ruined city.

"My real-world self. I don't think I was famous or anything, but I definitely came from money."

He's unsure where she's trying to take him with this.

"Well… that's good, right?"

"I guess," she says, to the neglected red-brick and Colonial-style buildings rolling by. Soon they will clear the outer fringes of the city.

Taciturn debates a follow-up, decides to go with it.

"Did you, ah, absorb anything, about your…?"

With Virginia's bracer now attached to her arm, Matilda rubs the leather softly.

"No, not really. At least, nothing about my mother. I guess that's why it was easy for Virginia to…" She trails off, before switching to the next obvious channel. "My father, though… I can't say anything for certain yet, but, I don't know. I sense *some*thing warm there. You know what, I don't know what I'm saying. Never mind. It's stupid."

She pulls a lever and her seat cants back, into a nearly full recline. Matilda turns her back to Taciturn. "If you're cool, I'm just going to take a nap."

He manages to mumble back. "Sure."

Even over the road-noise, even with her back to him, James can hear her faint weeping.

#

James pulls the car into a small gas station near Newport to take on fuel and supplies. In the distance, he can see a data storm bulking up in the sky.

Without a word, Matilda springs out of the passenger seat and starts cleaning and refueling the car. James likewise exits the vehicle and stretches, trying to figure out what to say. "You… uh… good out here?"

Matilda washes the window with a squeegee, making an A-OK sign with her thumb and forefinger. "I'm fine. I got this."

James' hand starts to open and close.

"I mean, if you want to…"

Matilda stops her cleaning and cocks an eyebrow, regarding him.

James aborts his original train of thought, switching tracks to another.

"What I mean is, do you want anything in particular? From inside the store. For yourself?"

Matilda shakes her head, and the Taciturn resigns to let her be. When he's halfway to the store, Matilda calls out to him. "Actually, can you see if they have those chocolates, with the coconut centers?"

He waves his hand in acknowledgement and enters the service station's mini-mart. Inside, he's greeted by a somber-looking shop

keeper.

"You'll probably want to hurry, stranger. This storm looks like it's going to hit hard. I was just planning on locking up and heading into town."

James sees only the attendant in the store.

"Okay. We'll be quick, but can I get a key to the restroom?"

The shopkeeper slides a key across the counter. Inside the bathroom, James heads straight for the sink. Turning the left faucet, he anticipates the warm water.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

The sink shakes at the pipe's inability to draw out warm water.

Shaking his head, James turns the right faucet on and a steady flow of cold water rushes into the sink.

Grunting, James briskly scrubs his hands and face with the icy water. As the dirt and grime from his travels swirl down the drain, James looks at the haggard man staring back at him from the filthy restroom mirror. There are a few more wrinkles under his eyes and more grey hairs in his beard than he remembers. James is about to turn off the water when he notices something on the graffiti-covered wall. Something pink stands out amongst the greens, yellows, and blacks.

Sweeping off the layer of dirt covering the image, James is surprised to reveal a cartoonish, pink unicorn. Its speech bubble reads "Be sure to use the Right, T."

Confused but amused, James chuckles and dries his hands.

"Where were you a second ago?" he asks the wall.

On his way out, James grabs an assortment of snacks, bottled drinks, and a pack of Lucky Strikes. Setting the pile of goods on the counter, he returns the bathroom key. Conspicuously anxious to leave, the shopkeeper quickly rings everything up, bags it all, and starts closing the shop before Taciturn steps outside.

With the storm approaching, an ozone-tinged dampness hangs in the air. As he approaches the car, Matilda spots him. "This thing was filthy. Not sure why I bothered to clean it, if it's just going to rain."

"No, it looks good. Here." James tosses the bag of goods to Matilda. "Enjoy."

James watches as a genuine smile appears on Matilda's face. "Holy crap, what the hell is an 'Emperor Size' candy bar? This is awesome, dude!"

Taciturn starts to say something when a beat-up Ford rolls into view from behind the store. Without a glance or second thought, the shopkeeper at the wheel pulls out in the direction of the nearby town. Turning his attention back to Matilda, James finds her staring at the looming storm roiling in the distance, seemingly entranced by its dark

beauty and promise of destructive power.

The wind and water mix together into a dense vortex that shimmers with a digital buzz as it completes each full rotation. Electricity flashes through the airborne debris and clouds. With each flash, he fancies that he can almost make out a phantom image. Each time the storm thunders, it sounds like a million booming voices all tangled together.

Taciturn stands next to Matilda.

"It remembers everything. Everything that ever happened to all of us, since we created it. Since we came here. Good, bad, shameful, stupid… everything. Every action of millions of people. Every day. The amount of data we produce is immense, and the System records all of it. But memory is still finite."

Matilda refuses to look away from the growing storm in the distance.

Taciturn continues, "After a while, new memories replace old ones, filling up storage. Eventually, when those data dumps are filled to capacity…"

Matilda answers for him. "…*that* happens."

James shifts his gaze from the storm back to Matilda.

"Before it's permanently deleted, the System archives it to the ocean and reviews it one last time. It decides what it can discard into the ocean and what it should salvage. It disassembles the intact memories into smaller chunks of data and constantly shifts them around, throwing some away and saving others."

Matilda speaks more to the skyborne vortex than to him. "It's looking for answers."

James doesn't follow. "Huh?"

Matilda continues, but maintains her trance-like focus on the storm.

"Like it's moving the pieces of a puzzle around, trying to put a picture together – a snapshot of humanity."

The clouds of data dust on the horizon churn and mix violently with the wind and water, clashing and booming in a dramatic aerial dance. Swirling into a mass that represents the discarded actions of millions of lives. Thoughts of love and hatred mingle together, flickers of hope and darkest hours of despair. And as more and more data is added, the vortex only grows.

Matilda's voice is as distant as the hideously-beautiful thunderstorm. "If this is happening after a massive memory trash dump, this is probably…"

James begins to understand her fixation.

"Yeah." he says, nodding. "This is probably related to what we did in Neverland. Anything you didn't absorb went… *there."*

Taciturn knows that she's retreated within herself. Not knowing what to say, he pauses on his way to the driver side door.

"Matilda, we should…"

Matilda takes a step forward towards the distant squall.

"Do you think she looks at us the same way we look at the storm?"

Taciturn stops and looks around. Before he even speaks, he frantically scans the nearby road, the now-closed gas station, the closest stretch of the tree-line, for someone else in their proximity.

"Who?"

The Scry is still staring at the storm. "The System. I know it sounds stupid, but I think she's very… curious. I mean, she's essentially God here, right? That must be confusing for something that observes so much."

James takes a few more tentative steps towards Matilda.

"There was a lot about its initial framework I was never told about. Whatever foundation it was built on, it's clearly evolved. Into something…" He stares up at the far-off, swirling chaos in the air. "I don't know."

The tornado gathers momentum, leeching wispy tendrils of nearby clouds, adding them to its dark, swirling mass. The storm starts sending blinding, searing bolts of energy to the ground. Seconds later, a bone-rattling *boom* reaches them.

For a moment, Taciturn is caught up in the sight. Looking over at Matilda, he realizes she's already settling back in the passenger seat.

Back on the road, the rumbling of the engine mixes with the distant, ever-more constant crash of thunder. Matilda watches rain trickle down the glass of the window, seemingly absorbed in the metronomic *thunka-thunka-thunka* of the windshield wipers. James wants to say something, but it takes him some time to find the words.

"I'm… not great with people. At least, not since getting here."

Matilda slowly turns her head to him, but James avoids making eye contact. He locks his gaze on the road to help him get through the conversation.

"Look, I guess what I'm trying to say is, we've both been through a lot. If there's… if you want to talk about something. Just let me know." The following silence only makes him uncomfortable, and James starts flexing his hand on the steering wheel.

Finally, Matilda responds, "It's just, all I want is my life back, but after all of this…" She looks back out the window. "That storm back there. It's the System, trying to make sense of other people's broken memories. Looking through them, *to understand what it means to be human.* Is that basically what I'm doing?"

Taciturn briefly takes his eyes off the road to look at Matilda, but

she stares at her reflection in the cold glass. James racks his brain trying to figure out what to say. “The difference is, you’re a *person,* Matilda, and…”

“And what?” the reflection asks.

All that comes to him is, “You’re not broken.”

James sees it ever so slightly, but it’s there. A small smile appears in the glass. He waits to see if the conversation will continue, but the Scry doesn’t say anything else.

#

It takes them less than a day to arrive at the entrance of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. Per James, the structure acts as a back-up channel between Virginia and Delaware. James brings the Cadillac to a stop, and Matilda looks down the road which disappears into the dark blue of the structure. Ever since the storm, she’s felt her mood deteriorating. More and more, she’s been retreating into herself. James has tried his best to talk to her, but it’s difficult to break years of intentional, *systematic,* standoffish behavior.

Sighing, she eats a piece of her candy bar, hoping that the pleasant taste will improve her disposition. It doesn’t. Stepping out of the car, she tries to play it cool. Despite what she’s feeling, she’ll do her best not to show it.

“So, they call this Devil’s Cross, huh? Is it because it’s Route 13? If so, that’s kinda lame.”

James inspect the surrounding area. “Uh-huh.” Paying attention to the wheel marks on the ground, he walks over to a sign. “There’s another reason for it as well.”

Matilda leans on the car, watching the Taciturn study the sign. While he examines it closely, she chews on another piece of chocolate. Demonic caricatures, slogans, and warnings are spray-painted on almost every available surface around the tunnel. Matilda tries to make sense of them, but they read more like the ramblings of the insane. Matilda is just about to get back into the car when James calls to her from where he stands.

“Come here, I want to show you something.”

Matilda pushes her hands into her pockets to keep them warm, and heads over to James. Standing by the sign, James pulls out a silver dollar and flips it a couple times in his hand.

“Heads or tails?” he asks, turning to her.

Matilda gives him the eyebrows. “Come again?”

James returns her expression with just the faintest smile. “You heard me, heads or tails?”

Matilda looks around the tunnel, trying to see if there's something she's missing.

"You said this Hank friend of yours was losing his mind, right? Are we close enough so that shit is contagious or something?"

Taciturn lets out a laugh that surprises her.

"Okay, though – seriously. Heads or Tails? Lucius or Chesapeake?" Stepping forward, he flips the coin in the air and catches it as it comes back down, smacking it flat to his wrist, covered by the hand that flipped it. "Come on, pick one."

Matilda surrenders to the idiocy of the moment.

"Fine, *tails,* but I saw how it landed, so I don't…"

Taciturn lifts his hand to reveal no coin at all. His wrist is completely empty.

"In this place, you must remember that Hank wrote the logic, or lack thereof, for everything."

Matilda scowls at his wrist, devoid of any coin-face, heads or tails. "I bet you're great at parties. So, what you're saying is, we walk through the tunnel and he's going to take all of our money."

James turns and points to the tunnel with its two deviating paths – one to the left, one to the right.

"This is the only way to the Delaware Spire. You asked why people call it Devil's Cross, it's because it's a 50/50 shot to make it through. You must choose between Chesapeake Bay Bridge and the Lucius J Kellam. Make the wrong choice, and you'll be lost forever in procedurally-generated roads."

Matilda looks from his bare wrist to the tunnel to James' face and back to the tunnel.

"You're going insane, aren't you? Oh, God – is it going to happen to me, too?"

The Taciturn walks over to the sign, wipes the mud and rain off it, and reveals a message: *Choose your toll, if you are bold.*

He gestures to the sign with his thumb. "He's completely nuts."

Matilda's frustration is only surpassed by James' cavalier attitude.

"That doesn't even *rhyme*. So, what are you suggesting we do? Just roll the dice and hope for the best? And why the hell are you still smiling?"

James turns his attention back to the sign. "I'd prefer to play the man, rather than play the odds."

Taciturn takes another silver dollar from his pocket and approaches the toll-booth boxes. Matilda watches as James tosses the coin in the right-hand coin-hopper. Satisfied with his decision, James walks back to the car.

Passing Matilda, he asks, "Do you believe in unicorns? I didn't, before today – but I guess you can't be sure of anything in the

Cyberside, right?"

Completely baffled, Matilda approaches the sign that James had been examining so closely. Among the grime, general profanity, and colorful illustrations, one particular bit of graffiti stands out amongst all the others. It's a cartoonish, pink unicorn with a text bubble that reads: *Remember, always keep to the right, T*.

Confused and tired, Matilda throws her hands up in the air, "I give up." She follows him to the car.

Settling back in her seat, Matilda buckles herself in. "Just wake me up when I can start stabbing something."

As the car approaches the roadblock on the right, the gate rises. She closes her eyes as their car is enveloped in the blue darkness of the tunnel.

Chapter 14: “The Spire”

Their car emerges from the tunnel onto a coastal highway that curves around a massive body of water. Created after the deactivation of the Maryland servers, this dark, murky inland sea was the System’s replacement for an entire state. The unnatural, unsettling nature of the landscape is accentuated by a large structure towering in the distance. A man-made mountain of buildings, spires, and arches rises from the ground and forms a gargantuan, tangled mess that dominates the horizon– Hank Brown’s domain.

Even from this distance, Hank’s golden palace glitters and shines at the summit, an ornate crown supported and surrounded by the massed clusters of smaller, luxurious homes forming the cluttered slopes beneath it. Moving down the Spire, each level becomes a little less lavish than the tier above it, eventually expanding into widespread squalor at the lower levels and finally devolving into a vast, sprawling shantytown at the base.

As their car draws ever closer to the massive assembly, both James and Matilda can see the mountain moving. Layers and buildings shift like segments of a living organism, or intricate pieces of slow, titanic machinery.

The words come against James’s will. “My God, Hank. What have you done?”

Matilda, equally dumbstruck, speaks in a small voice. “Oh, shit. That’s where we need to go?”

James brings the car to a stop. For a moment, they silently regard the monstrosity eating up the horizon.

“Hank finally did it. He created the Platform to end all platforms.”

Unable to take her eyes off the structure, Matilda asks, “Can I get a straight answer for once?”

James reflects on a time well before the Cyberside.

“Back at the turn of the century, platforms took a huge step forward. I mean, they were always around, but that was when they really took off. Big companies would invest to essentially build their own highly-controlled, online ecosystems. Each was a place to attract people, and their wallets, where companies could provide all their content in a centralized location. It became a standard business practice, but it limited content distribution.”

Without taking her eyes off the structure, Matilda says, “You’re speaking gibberish again, my dude.”

James comes back to himself, to the interior of the car, to Matilda.

“Sorry. I…” James scratches his beard, trying to think. “Basically, companies put their proprietary and third-party content on their own platforms and made people pay to access or subscribe to it. They wanted to hold all their content under their own set of rules – and keep all the data from their users inside.”

James puts the car back in motion towards the looming structure.

“It was all about greed and control. They created these platforms in order to control content distribution, but the backlash was pretty abrupt. Most people felt that if something lived on the internet, it should be free. Others were just lazy, I think, and didn’t want to go to different platforms for different content. That’s when this Russian guy, Eugene, came into play. See, Eugene was one of the latter.”

Matilda laughs. “So, he was one of the lazy ones.”

James allows himself a chuckle of his own. “To the extent that he just wanted to have access to everything in one place and not be tied to any platform in particular. He felt that, as a consumer, companies should defer to him, not the other way around. Add to that, each platform pushed for proprietary access to data and limited API access for the user. It all led Eugene to build his own content aggregator, called *Hydra*.”

James shifts gears as the Caddy labors up its gradually-elevating course.

“Hydra would analyze a platform’s content, identify the products, and make suggestions based on the user’s previous interests or actions, the whole time consolidating everything to a single feed. It handled all the searching – basically gave you a buffet menu of what you wanted, keeping the control in your hands. It would analyze the content on each platform, weed out the convoluted relevance- and marketing-algorithms, and give people straightforward lists of content and services. Now instead of each platform controlling how its content was seen, users could survey everything, from anywhere.

Matilda sits up straight, as if to more clearly study the slowly-approaching megastructure. “You haven’t said anything about Hydra stealing from the other platforms. So, if people were still purchasing content from these platforms… there’s still something else here that’s not adding up.”

The car subtly protests as the incline gradually steepens.

“I think by that point, the bigger companies were more about control and getting valuable user data than about the actual money. Hydra’s data was all stored on the users’ machines so the platform providers couldn’t see it, and the whole thing ran on blockchain… or, I guess you could say, it wasn’t gated anymore. No one entity could control it. It was the people taking content back into their own hands. People preferred registering for Hydra, and remaining anonymous, to

committing to any one platform and exposing themselves to risk."

Matilda takes a bite of her candy bar. "So, it's like Neverland. The companies wanted the data to see the users' 'true selves'. If it was stored in Hydra, they basically wouldn't see any of that stuff."

The Caddy groans with the strain of its continued climb. Taciturn rubs the dashboard coaxingly, urging the car onward.

"Basically, yeah. As a non-commercial product, it was on every device that mattered in less than a year. The big companies went crazy when all the revenue they were raking in from user data and content advertisement started to drop. Without all that data, their platforms couldn't even work properly anymore. That was when Hank stepped in."

Clearing an intervening barren hillside, they can suddenly see billowing clouds of dark smoke rising from the lowest, sprawling sections of the mountainous monstrosity.

James squints, taken aback. "What the *hell*…?"

Matilda leans out the window. "Probably just burning trash. Go on, though. What did this Hank guy do with Hydra? That's what I need to know."

Taciturn eases off the accelerator slightly.

"As the head of R&D and director of Third Party Relations at Fall Water Lake, Hank realized he could integrate something like Hydra into the Cyberside – letting him view and control all the content from people within his realm. When it came time to launch, the lion's share of the platforms migrating to the Cyberside got indexed under his version – the Spire. Hank told the companies that if they didn't want to experience the same failures under Hydra, they'd need their own version in the Cyberside.

As they close on the outer wall of the city, Matilda begins checking her blades. "So, they went with it… because they were greedy and scared. Typical."

James opens his mouth, pauses, then speaks.

"When you're desperate for something, it's easy to get fooled. Hank promised them all the data and money they had in the old world, before Hydra. There was only one catch – the corporations had to register in Delaware, and change their hosting solution to somewhere within the state. Delaware was an easy sell back then – it was old-world shorthand for 'come for the tech-friendly welcome, stay for the tax incentives'. Hank convinced them that, for the migration to succeed, they would need everything 'all under one roof'. It was a no-brainer for the corporations."

Approaching the Spire gates, they simultaneously register the layer of ash blanketing the ground, and the foul, overpowering smell suddenly filling the air. Frowning, James cranks up his window,

motioning for Matilda to do the same. “Yep, you were right. Burning trash.”

James coughs, clears his throat, and continues.

“But when the Transfer finally happened, he hacked the whole domain. Brought everything under his control. Having all the platforms together on the servers of his choosing made it possible to pull off such a massive hack. Hank threw this epic feast, and all his guests were invited to party, right here at this Spire. When they all woke up, they discovered their holdings weren’t indexed to the Spire, but were under Hank Brown’s personal control. It was the scam of the century. Hell of a retirement from Fall Water Lake, if you ask me.”

Taciturn brings the car to a stop near the outer wall’s giant gate. As they get out into the fetid air, both Matilda and James note the ranks of parked cars in myriad states of dilapidation. Some are old and rusted with flat tires, while others seem comparatively new, albeit coated with a thick layer of dust.

“The part I don’t get is,” James says, “why would anyone actually want to come here unless they had to?”

Matilda looks up to the glittering pinnacle of the structure dominating the sky. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Grabbing his inventory bag from the car, James still can’t quite believe that this is happening. Of all the executives at Fall Water, Hank was one of the few he actually liked. They would play chess together during breaks – when James wasn’t in crunch, at least. Hank had even met his family for dinner a couple of times.

After storing extra supplies from the car in his backpack’s inventory, James checks the ammo in his pistol. Under the shadow of the Spire’s looming presence, he can’t shake the feeling that the pursuit of this key will only end in violence.

“Well, that’s not ominous…”

Matilda’s words drift over to him. Slamming the driver side door, James looks at their ride one last time. Patting the roof, the Taciturn walks over to where Matilda is standing. Before them is a large medieval-styled portcullis, drawn open above a sturdy-looking, thickly-planked drawbridge.

In the newly-parked relative quiet, he can practically hear Matilda roll her eyes. “This guy is really pushing the whole *Dungeons & Dragons* thing, isn’t he?”

Taciturn shifts the weight of his backpack.

“Did you get everything from the car?”

Matilda nods, “Yeah – as much as I’m going to miss that hunk of junk, it feels good to walk around a bit.”

Looking back up at the top of the mountain, James lets out a long sigh.

"You say that now, but don't complain to me when you're tired."

Cautiously, they make their way across the drawbridge, imagining what madness awaits them.

#

Side by side, they enter the outermost fringes of Hank Brown's dominion, and Matilda is horrified by what she sees. As she steps over puddles that she hopes are just sooty water, Matilda is overwhelmed by the palpable poverty around her. Adults crouch and huddle before their hovels, warily eying their passage. Some beg for coins as the two of them pass by, but most just stare blankly at nothing. The only conspicuous signs of life are the few grubby children who run around, playing in the dirt and climbing over abandoned or broken equipment. Repulsed, Matilda turns to the Taciturn.

"So how does this fit into Hank's *platform?* This doesn't look like it serves any decent purpose to me."

James shakes his head.

"I'm not entirely sure. Looks like you can… *fall back down,* here. We saw parts of this Spire moving like that, earlier… maybe it has to do with that. Like rising and falling in the ranks."

Matilda gestures up to the top of the mountain.

"Yeah, but how do they work their way up?"

James shields his eyes from the sun, squinting to make out Hank's castle in the distance.

"I've been trying to put that together. Hank is all about thinking in the abstract."

Matilda cracks her knuckles.

"Translation: He's insane."

James scans the downtrodden faces of those living in – consigned to – this section of the Spire.

"Alright, I think I've got it… maybe. I'm guessing he sees each *person* as a product. Basically, if this is the platform, all the people are the apps. Each person has value, based on the things they can do for Hank – probably things like specialized skills, services they can perform, things they can create, or something similar. If the value of those things fluctuates, the person is re-ranked upward… or downward. Basically, Hank manipulates them like pieces in a board game – and since they're in his Spire, of course they have to play by his rules."

Taciturn pauses, then nods thoughtfully.

"So, these would be the people with very little to offer."

Outraged, Matilda clenches her fists.

“But people aren’t *products*. You can’t just ‘rate’ someone, like they’re an *object* for review!”

James holds up his hands defensively.

“Look, I agree. But that type of thinking doesn’t work here. This place is under Hank’s logic. He believes that everyone has a purpose – nothing but sets of data and skills, used for service. And thus, everyone *is* rated by their ‘usefulness’.”

Matilda can feel a sickened rage building within her, and the increased need to punch something. A group of dirty children runs past her, and she tries to wrestle the rage down, to keep the anger from her eyes. She starts moving again, further towards the center of the shantytown.

“But that doesn’t take into account everything else that makes someone human. You can’t rate someone solely on talents.”

James matches her stride. “And yet we do it all the time.” He points towards an arch at the other end of the camp. “Look.”

Matilda tracks his gesture with her eyes to a giant archway leading to the next section. Large writing traces the top of the arch: ***The Journey Starts Here.***

Her indignation gets the better of her. “Oooh, great – another sign, another load of cryptic bullshit. You know, I’m getting the feeling this Hank guy isn’t as creative as he apparently wants everyone else to be.”

She pauses as she notices something strange.

The area nearest the entrance is completely deserted, save the presence of the Taciturn and herself. She turns around to examine the faces of the Spire denizens they’ve already passed. Few acknowledge them, and no one has made a move any closer to the archway.

“If these people are able to retry their ascent – why don’t they? It can’t be worse than staying here.”

James looks back at the squalor they have just traversed.

“Fear. When you start something and fail, it’s frustrating. It’s demoralizing. If you fail something in front of countless others, the social stigma alone can be enough to keep you from trying again. Disappointment and bitterness can take over. Not everyone has the fortitude to get back up after they’ve been kicked down enough times.”

Matilda stares up at the ominous mountaintop keep above them. Squinting her eyes, “So where does that leave us?”

James moves next to her.

“Hank has the key. He’s at the top. So, I think the plan is work our way upward.”

Matilda nods, still trying to focus on the castle high up in the clouds.

“Yeah, sure – but I’m asking, what’s the actual ‘path to the top’ for us in this shithole? We need to figure out how two new products can hit the market, without getting lost in the shuffle.”

James scratches his beard.

“I’m sure we’ll figure that out.”

Matilda cracks her back. “Are you ready for this?”

James nods in the direction of the gateway. “Yeah, totally.”

Matilda doesn’t move. “Are you sure?”

James gives her a perplexed look.

Matilda motions around the slums. “I mean, you knew this guy like you knew Virginia, right? Are you ready to do what we did again?”

James shifts his backpack to his other shoulder. “To be honest, I’m hoping it doesn’t come to that. Hank might be crazy, but part of me hopes we can just convince him to give us the key.”

Matilda’s offers a tight smile, clearly forced. “Okay. You know the guy.”

She lags behind him as they head to the archway, grimly mulling the notion of mercy to someone who could create a realm like this. How is this not, in its own way, just as bad as Neverland, if not worse? All Matilda can think about is killing this Hank Brown in his lofty castle, and setting this place free.

Dwelling on these dark thoughts, she follows James through the archway and into the first test of the Spire.

#

With a grunt, James hauls himself over another cliff face. He’s lost count of how many they’ve climbed since leaving the sprawling slums below. He stands up to find Matilda’s hand stretched down to him from the next-highest ledge. Grasping her hand, he clutches and scrabbles at the cliff-face as the Scry helps him upward. With a groan, James finally rolls his weight over the ledge onto his back, raises himself up on his elbows, and looks back down. The area outside the pit was a literal mountain-climb. Feeling the sweat drip down his forehead, James is beginning to agree with Matilda on the subject of Hank’s fundamental lack of creative vision.

Transfixed by the view from this high up, James takes a moment to collect himself and let his beating heart slow down. Next to him, Matilda kicks a rock off the ledge. James chuckles between intakes of breath.

“Well… I guess there’s… no turning back now.”

Matilda shrugs. “At least it doesn’t smell like garbage anymore.”

Matilda's observation encourages James to breathe as deeply as he can. The mountain air is refreshing, heavy with the strong presence of pine. Finally standing up, James surveys his surroundings. The plateau quickly transitions into dense forest that stretches forward for miles.

Matilda walks up next to him. "This doesn't make any sense. We would have seen something like this from the ground. This shouldn't… *be* like this. Right?"

Shrugging, James indicates a dirt path leading towards the tree line.

"The whole platform is technically a maze; this is just another part of it."

James turns around and twirls a finger next to his ear.

"Also – crazy!"

They both laugh, follow the path for several minutes until it abruptly stops at an unlikely wall of dense, tangled greenery. Together, they begin to push their way through the thick brush. It's a process that takes considerable effort.

After several hours punctuated by encounters with occasional wanderers, none of whom seem interested in conversation, James stops and pulls a water bottle from his pack. He squirts a stream of cold, water into his mouth then offers the bottle to Matilda.

"Thanks," she says, taking it from him and drinking deeply.

James looks around at the expanse of trees surrounding them.

"This must be one of Hank's riddles. I just need to figure out what it is, or if there's a pattern. He has a thing for rhymes."

Matilda kicks over a fallen log, sending it rolling into a standing tree,

"Are you serious? Like, he was into rhymes before he went crazy? Shouldn't that maybe have been some kind of a red flag?"

James takes another long pull from the water bottle and wipes his mouth.

"We have to think like him if we want to get through this."

Matilda hops up onto the fallen log, teetering her arms for balance.

"Great – 'think like a madman', he says. Well, if we roam around in the forest any longer, I'm thinking *crazy* will start to come real natural."

The Taciturn puts the bottle back in his pack and cycles through its inventory menu. "You hungry at all?"

Matilda jumps eagerly off the log and heads over to him.

"Do we have any of those spicy chips left?"

Pulling out an apple, James tosses it to Matilda.

"Yeah, we do. But you should eat this instead."

Matilda regards the firm, glossy apple in her hand, then shifts her gaze to James with narrowed eyes.

"You're the worst."

She bites into the crisp apple and wipes the juice from her mouth with her sleeve. She spins around slowly, looking at the forest as she chews.

"I guess this literally is one of those 'can't see the forest for the trees' moments, isn't it?"

James pauses in the act of taking an energy bar from the pack.

"What did you just say?"

Matilda executes a fluid, graceful turn on her heel, fast-balling the core of the already-devoured apple into a nearby bush. "You know. Like maybe we gotta take a step back, to look at it differently. 'Can't see the forest for the trees.'?"

James is instantly on his feet.

"Yes, Exactly!"

Positioning himself in the middle of the clearing, Taciturn closes his eyes and mumbles, thinking. *Even Hank would need a way to weed out the apps that aren't important to him.* Crazy or no, Hank wouldn't likely feel obliged to reinvent the wheel with his platform technology.

Opening his eyes, James takes a few steps back and deliberately defocuses his vision.

Disregarding his preconceived notions, James begins to perceive patterns of etch marks in the trees. He can't make out what they say, but he can tell they're words.

The final piece comes together for him. James realizes that, if they're apps–the first vetting process is search engines.

His laugh echoes through the trees around them while Matilda looks at him blankly.

"You know, it's pretty ingenious, when you think about it."

She raises an eyebrow. "So, this is it. You've finally lost it, haven't you?"

Smiling at her, James gestures at the tree around them.

"Okay, yes – sort of. Go with me on this, because it will *definitely* sound crazy. This whole forest is connected to the platform's search engine. Look, I'll show you. Can I have one of your knives?"

Matilda bites the inside of her cheek, but she pulls out a knife reluctantly, reverses it with a twirl, and hands it over to the Taciturn. Grasping the handle, he approaches the nearest tree. After a brief consideration, he slowly and crudely carves the word *Taciturn* into the bark. When he's finished, a wind blows through the leaves – and a small forest path reveals itself.

He turns to her, just barely containing himself.

"See?"

Matilda shakes her head in disbelief.

"Neat trick, Gramps. Care to explain it to the rest of the class?"

James in no longer able to contain his excitement.

"We need to write key words about ourselves into the trees, so audiences farther up can recognize us. In order to increase our relevance, try thinking of words that are definitive, but also popular. Does that all make sense? Want to give it a try?"

Matilda pulls out another blade, walking it from finger to finger absently, thinking. "Um… sure. Carve something about me into search trees, so people elsewhere will like me. No, totally makes sense."

Approaching a different tree, Matilda carves *Hot* into the bark, and the path opens slightly more. She turns to James, smiling, "You said it had to be a popular word, right? I guess this means I'm hot, huh?"

James gives her a troubled look. "My suggestion is, avoid too many, ah, exploitive words like that. It might skew the outcome, might pigeonhole you. Also, we don't know how many words we get to try. If there's a limit, we don't want to waste them."

Matilda makes an irked noise. "Fine. I'll stay on the left side of the path, and you on the right. That way we won't get separated. If we take turns, we'll each give the other time to think of another word."

James nods. "Solid plan. Let's get to it."

Matilda carves *Scry* into the next tree, and the road seems to range further still into the forest. They continue to carve words one at a time, extending the path by turns. They choose key words that define their personalities, skills, lifestyles and preferences. It isn't long before both of them start hitting a wall.

After Matilda scratches *Searching* into a tree, the road doesn't alter its aspect in any discernible way. Frustrated, she chucks her knife into the depths of the forest.

James reaches into his pack and pulls out a bag of chips and approaches Matilda. Offering her the snack, James puts a hand on her shoulder. "I get it. It's got to be hard coming up with applicable terms when you're still trying to piece your own memories together. So, don't carve words you think you *should* know. You're only going to get more frustrated. Just take a break for a second, and I'll keep working on my side."

James is about to carve a new word into his tree when, in his peripheral vision, the forest path opens up.

A quick turn reveals Matilda stabbing a fresh knife into the completed word. *KILLER*. Yanking the knife out of the tree trunk, she grimly trudges onward to the next tree.

It doesn't go any smoother for James. As a man who's carefully maintained a standing psychological distance in the Cyberside,

definitive words describing his digital self do not come easily. The Taciturn hits his own private wall with the word *Wanderer*. Mentally exhausted, he rubs the bridge of his nose. Unlike Matilda, he knows his past, but does his best not to remember it. Looking back up at the tree, he stares deeply into the bark.

Reluctantly, he carves *Regrets*. And the path widens.

They both continue in silence, slicing verbal cross-sections of themselves into one fresh trunk after another – one expressing the life she's forged while being in the Cyberside, the other reluctantly acknowledging the life he left behind. One on the left, one on the right. They continue to blaze the trail. To cut, hew and slash their hurts, losses and obsessions into the simulated, living tree-bark of the Spire

Hunger – Honeymoon

Insomnia – Christmas Morning

Slavers – Arguments

Lost in their respective self-reflections, neither immediately notices the forest path has led them to a giant tree with a door carved into it. James desperately tries to wrench himself out of the quagmire of his memories. Jamming everything he's recalled back down, he bars and locks the vault inside his head.

Wiping his eyes, James spots Matilda staring intently at the last word she's carved into the tree. Collecting his things, James heads over to her.

"Hey, you okay? Need a minute?"

There's a coldness is in her voice when she responds, "No, let's go."

James tries to see what's she's gouged into the tree but can't make out the word.

"It's okay, we can…"

Matilda moves towards the door.

"No, we're still a long way from the top."

James casts a final gaze at the forest behind them and follows Matilda towards the door.

#

As she emerges from the other side of the tree, Matilda is overwhelmed by the sudden increase in sheer audible volume. The serenity of the forest has been replaced with the clamoring commotion of a street bazaar. Vendors shout for customers' attention, and boisterous arguments erupt over the prices of wares or services. She feels trapped in a never-ending sea of human bodies, all pushing and

fighting their way through.

The castle at the top of the mountain appears closer, but it's still far out of reach. With her eyes, Matilda follows the path up to the next section of the Spire. She spots a lift ferrying people and goods upwards. At the lift's base, Matilda sees a writhing crowd of people clambering over each other as they wait their turn to go up.

"Seriously? It couldn't be that easy, could it?"

She turns around at the pressure of a hand on her shoulder, her blade gripped and ready. She relaxes when she sees James. The recent trip through the 'search forest' has her on edge, and this sudden crowd has instantly magnified the problem. Matilda can see the same uneasiness on James's face. Sometimes she wishes he was better at communicating – but right now she's thankful for his discretion. She follows the Taciturn to a unit of guards watching over the Bazaar.

One of the sentinels acknowledges them even before they say anything.

"Ahhh. You two. Finally made it out of the forest, huh? Quite an interesting pair you make."

Ignoring the comments, James asks, "What is this place?"

Excited, the guard gestures to seemingly everything around them.

"This, friends, is the Spire's Traffic Acquisition Bazaar. The best and easiest way to get yourself a much-needed audience at the top. That lift over there can be used to avoid the perils of going up the mountain."

Matilda observes James as he scans the marketplace. Grunting thanks to the guard, Taciturn starts walking – in a direction precisely opposite that of the lift.

The guard calls out, "I can recommend some great vendors, if you…" but his voice is already drowned out by the general volume of the marketplace.

Matilda trusts that James knows what he's doing, but the farther they walk into the crowd, the more they are accosted by sellers, each promising to get them the popularity they need to be 'trending', each more off-puttingly-enthusiastic than the last. Matilda hears proposals of all types as she maneuvers her way through the crowd. A tall, well-dressed man approaches the Taciturn and offers him a plan for direct acquisitions. Another, shorter, more casually dressed man sees Matilda and rambles on about a foolproof plan focused on a simple revenue share model. Despite her ignoring him, the man continues to follow them.

"With my contacts higher up, you'll have record numbers!"

An irritated, withering look from the Taciturn sends the man away in mid-pitch. With the vendor gone, Matilda can hear herself think.

“So just to clarify, we aren’t we using the elevator. They’re all saying we don’t really need money for it, and we can just share our popularity when we’re at the top. But I doubt it’s that simple.”

James shakes his head.

“Yeah, it’s not that simple.”

Matilda sidesteps a young woman intently talking to a vendor. She calls after James.

“Yeah, I get that. It’s clearly a trap, but I’m asking how.”

James stops and faces her. Matilda can tell he’s getting frustrated with their environment. His hand flexes as he talks.

“Sorry, I just want to get out of here as quick as possible, but I should make sure we’re on the same page.”

James makes an obscene, rhythmic gesture with his hand to everyone around them. “First, the ‘merchandise’ these guys are selling is total crap. Sure, we can use the elevator to get the next level, but we won’t be able to retain the popularity once we get there.”

Matilda looks at the vendors around her, now fully understanding what it is they’re selling. Disgusted, she says, “If we lose it once we get there, we’ll have to acquire more from them to keep going up to the next level.”

James gestures towards the mountain pass.

“Exactly. It’s all non-organic support. When we get all the way up to Hank, he could easily just shut it down. Unfortunately, we need to go up the hard way, or it doesn’t count.”

Nodding, Matilda pushes her way through the crowd towards an exit leading up the mountain pass.

Once they are slightly above the bazaar, Matilda turns and looks down at it. She wonders how many people have chosen the lift instead of the path. How many, in their fear of falling back down to the very bottom, have abandoned all ambition and stayed here? Now they merely perpetuate the cycle, selling the drug of fake popularity to other people who are also afraid of falling back to the bottom, and will do anything – even if it’s illusory – to stay out of that lowest, miserable sprawl. Those most passionately hawking meaningless popularity don’t even believe it any more – the top might as well not even exist for them.

Matilda turns to start hiking up the mountain path.

“If Hank considers people products, these people sure aren’t proving him wrong.”

Chapter 15: “Crossroads”

Continuing their trek up the mountain path, Matilda notices the air getting progressively thinner. She can’t recall the last time she had to walk so continuously uphill. The rumbling in her stomach reminds her that she hasn’t eaten since the forest. Pulling out her prized bag of spicy chips, Matilda can already taste the savory spices when a gust of wind snatches the bag from her hand and sends it flying. Cursing, she scurries over to where it has landed – a small ditch to one side of the trail. Reaching for the bag still gently crackling in the breeze, Matilda is startled to find a pile of brightly colored clothes on the ground. When Matilda realizes what she’s looking at, she utters a cry of revulsion.

Abandoned in the ditch are the remains of another traveler whose journey up the Platform Mountain ended with, presumably, little or no fanfare. As Matilda reluctantly inspects the tatter-clothed body, she tries to imagine who this person was and what her dreams were. Did she want to reach the top for riches and glory, or to simply escape the squalor and chaos below?

James’ voice interrupts her contemplation.

“There’s nothing we can do for her, Matilda. We should keep going.”

The cold wind bites at her. Her words rush out in a bitter torrent.

“This whole place doesn’t make any sense. Everyone’s competing with each other, just so they can run this hellhole themselves, but it’s a rigged game from the start! How can they honestly believe Hank will give up any power? If everyone just leaves, he can have his mountain all to himself.”

James steps closer to her side but doesn’t look at the body.

“They’re all indexed. Besides, humans are creatures of habit. They crave structure. It might seem extreme, but people on this platform believe they’ll be rewarded once they reach the top.”

She knows that James’ words aren’t meant to infuriate her, but they do.

“No! There’s no power at the top, it’s just an illusion! People suffer this bullshit because they can imagine what it’ll be like if they actually make it to the top. But it’s a fucking lie. The king calls the shots and can change the rules on a whim. There’s no way to win with a rigged system.” She points to the body face down in the ditch. “But they’ll kill themselves trying to achieve it anyway.”

This time, James takes a moment before responding.

“Clearly they don’t look at it the same as you. It’s a simple risk versus reward situation for them. The only way to accomplish

something is to put yourself out there." In her peripheral vision, Matilda see James finally look at the body.

"I know it doesn't look like it, but I think Hank views his platform as good for people. As crazy as that sounds."

Matilda clenches her fists. She can hear it in James' voice. Somewhere deep down, he still hopes he won't have to kill his friend. But as she looks at the body, the anger mounts. She lets the harsh mountain wind do the screaming she cannot. "He's insane."

James places a hand on her shoulder, but it only causes Matilda to clench her fists tighter.

"Power corrupts. You never know what you're going to do when you're given that much control."

Matilda pulls away and points a critical finger at James.

"How can you say that? There's no way you or I would have let this go this far. No, I think power just reveals who you really are, it doesn't turn you into something. Donovan is an asshole. Virginia wanted control. And Hank likes to sit above it all and watch people dance for him."

"Matilda, wait…" James calls after her, but she doesn't want to hear. The sooner they get off this stupid mountain, the better. Matilda lets the anger keep her warm as she trudges farther up the slope. She focuses everything on placing one foot in front of the other. She's so focused on her movements, Matilda doesn't notice the precise point at which the scrabbly mountain pass turns into a garden trail. The Scry looks up from her thoughts to find the Taciturn still behind her–and a beautiful garden spread out before them.

"Wait, when did this happen?"

James gives her a concerned look. "We passed through the cave a while ago, and it brought us to this section of the Spire. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sorry. Just… never mind."

They continue along the path through the garden until they reach an ornate marble wall with a gold frame. They follow the wall to a set of immaculate gates that block the entrance into the next area. A warden's booth extends from the wall and the lights inside are the only other signs of activity.

James shrugs, "Well, looks like we're headed in the right direction."

Cautiously, they enter the booth and find themselves in a small kiosk manned by an elderly man wearing a plaid sweater vest. Noting the newcomers' presence in his station, the man puts down his paper and takes off his reading glasses.

"Welcome to Niche Gardens, friends. I know who you both are. News is spreading fast in this place about the Scry and Taciturn. What

an exciting couple you two make! I've never seen anything trend this fast before."

James and Matilda exchange surprised looks, but Matilda decides to capitalize on their apparent renown.

"Great – so if you know who we are, then you know what we're trying to do. How about you let us just pass on to the next section?"

The man chuckles and nods. He pushes a button and the gates effortlessly swing open.

That sounds good to me – I don't want any trouble. I'll let you through to the other side, but first I need to show you something. Let an old man try to talk some sense into those heads of yours."

Matilda gives James a questioning look even as her hand inches slowly toward the blades arrayed in their concealed sheaths. Taciturn gives her the barest discernible shake of his head.

"Certainly, old man." he says. "Lead the way."

Reluctantly, Matilda follows to meet the warden on the other side of the gate. Matilda is stunned to find a beautiful suburban street surrounded by lavish homes, each one unique and masterfully built.

#

The old man talks as they walk.

"You young folks are always so eager to make it to the top. So concerned with your social status, huh? Big goals, huge ambitions to change the world. I understand all of that, I was young once too, you know. But in the end, is it something that would truly make you happy?"

The man waves a hand to the buildings around them.

"Is there really anything so bad about having just a simple, comfortable life?"

The old man leads them from the main street down a narrower lane. On either side, Matilda catches glimpses of families in their homes. Window-framed forms of people eating dinner together, playing games, and enjoying each other's company.

"See, I don't think it's such a bad thing. Sure, these people made it this far up the Spire, and they're content with staying here. No need to risk more just to climb a little higher. Unlike those people who just keep running around like damn hamsters. Where does it get them? A little farther up the ladder, sure. Or maybe it sends them back down."

A turn in the road brings them to a new area in Niche Gardens. Matilda spots a green field leading to a large picturesque high school.

"My grandson is graduating soon. Very proud of that lad… but, coming back to the matter at hand. Niche Gardens is a place where

people have decided enough is enough. This place suits our needs. You'd be hard pressed to find a more peaceful place in the all the Cyberside, if you ask me."

The warden leads them to a quiet cul-de-sac located right behind the school. Stopping at the dead end, Matilda realizes that every house has a name on its mailbox save for two unmarked ones situated next to each other.

"Look, I'll be honest. Hank knows why you're here, James, and he doesn't want it to come to that. On account of your friendship, he's asked me a special favor. Judging from the key words you two used in the forest, we think you'd make quite the addition to our community. I guess what I'm asking is, would you like to stay here with us?"

Matilda closes her eyes and gives her head a single vigorous shake, as though trying to dislodge something in her ear. Something preventing her from hearing correctly.

"Stay here?"

She opens her eyes to find herself in the same idyllic neighborhood.

"Look… don't you two think you've done enough already? I mean, it's more than anyone else can say. Heck, toppling Neverland was a feat unto itself, don't you think? You two deserve some rest, and we have everything here you could possibly want."

Matilda still can't believe what she's hearing. She's about to reply, when she realizes she hasn't heard James utter a word for the entire walk. When she turns to him, the look on the Taciturn's face hits her like a bag of hammers.

James longingly gazes into the windows of an unclaimed house. From inside, the laughter of a young boy and the excited yapping of a small dog can be heard. Matilda catches a fleeting glimpse of a woman walking by the kitchen window.

"So much wandering, James. Don't you deserve some happiness already? Step through that door, and life will be like it used to be. You'd be so happy here, and this town sure could use your engineering skills."

Matilda witnesses what just moments previously she would have thought impossible. James' eyes brim and spill, sending tears running down his face. The sight shocks to Matilda to her core. Can James possibly be battling the same thoughts she had when they entered Neverland?

As if sensing her thoughts, the old man turns his attention to the Scry.

"And you, Matilda – which of course, we both know isn't your real name – this whole mess started with you wanting to get your memories back, but now you've become Donovan's assassin? Is that

really what you want? We can get your life restored. It just takes some unlocking. Something you've already started."

He gestures to the other unclaimed house.

"It might not be as luxurious as the life you had back in the real world, but that shouldn't matter if you're with your parents. "

With his words, the lights turn on within the house, and the silhouettes of a man and woman appear in the upstairs window.

Matilda scowls, "No, this is *bulls*hit. All of it. Everything you're talking about – his family, my past. This is all just an illusion. None of it's real." She turns to James but finds no help in his lost expression.

The warden is shocked at her accusations. "Of *course* it's an illusion. I never said it wasn't. But if it's the fantasy you *want,* does it matter? If you prefer the illusion to reality, doesn't that make it *more* real? Like I said, you both deserve this."

The old man shrugs his narrow shoulders, "It's seems like a good deal to me, but like I said, it's your call. I hope you take it. You both seem like a couple of reasonable young folks, and that doesn't often come our way nowadays."

In the brilliant sunshine, a pair of squirrels dash across the road between them. Just another minute, perfect detail that contributes to the pleasant, peaceful, saccharine environment.

James finally speaks.

Still staring at the house, his voice is quiet. "A deal suggests conditions."

The warden takes a pipe out of his pocket and starts fingering tobacco into it.

"There's a permanent tenant agreement, of course. It's pretty standard, but there are a couple of clauses that you need to know about. No more scaling, that's rule number one. You can't go farther up the Spire – but it also means you can't go back down."

Matilda makes no attempt to mask the anger in her voice.

"So that's it. This is how Hank eliminates competition. Feels like a bribe to me."

Keenly focused on his pipe, the warden doesn't look up.

"Well, just because it's a bribe, darling, doesn't mean it's not a generous one."

He lights his pipe, puffing on it with satisfaction.

"I'd say offering you a decent life sounds pretty generous to me. Unless you prefer all the hardships you two keep enduring? Sleeping on the ground, watching your back, pissing off people left and right. Not to mention the body trail you've been leaving behind."

Matilda steps closer to James. She can smell the savory dinner being served inside the nearby house. From within, the boy's voice pipes up, "When will Daddy be home?"

The look on James' face almost crushes her resolve. Slowly, Matilda approaches him and puts her hand in his. Startled and disoriented, James looks around at his surroundings, at the warden with his grandfatherly pipe, and finally focuses on Matilda.

Desperately she scans his face, trying to work out what the Taciturn is thinking. After a few seconds, James releases her hand, fumbles around in his pocket and eventually pulls out a cigarette.

The warden asks, "Well?"

James turns to face the old man. "There's no denying that Hank makes a generous offer." The warden takes another peaceful puff, nodding. "But I don't think we can accept."

The old man seems to miss his mouth with the pipe stem on his next attempt. He finds the mark on his second.

"May I ask why?"

Matilda notices James' right hand open and close.

"It's not that I don't want this…"

The warden raises an eyebrow. "But?"

James continues, "You keep saying this is what we deserve. What we've earned."

The sound of laughter draws James' gaze back at the house.

"But you're wrong. I *don't* deserve that, in there. Not after…"

He pauses, and Matilda can all but see the lump forming in his throat.

"Maybe I would come to enjoy it. But every day… would be a reminder that they're not really here."

A new stillness settles over the neighborhood, and Matilda is unsure what to do. The old man had promised to take them out of here, but he doesn't seem inclined to move an inch. The Scry fights the urge to reach for one of her blades.

Finally, the warden chuckles and cleans his pipe.

"So if you're not staying, why are you here? I don't know about you two, but I don't have any more time to spend just chatting. You two still have a ways to go."

Matilda is the first to see it. The potential homes have been replaced with a gate similar to that which they saw near the warden's small kiosk. Matilda nods to the old man, grabs James' hand, and leads the Taciturn to the gate.

Every instinct within Matilda tells her not to look back. The irrational fear creeps in that even entertaining the thought of lingering will somehow drag both of them back there, maybe for good. She pushes forward, still clutching James' hand, but against her better judgment she does finally glance back, for just a moment. The gates begin closing, and she can see the warden walking back to his booth. From this distance, it's hard to make out anything with clarity, but it

almost looks as if the man's feet have turned into hooves, as if he has also gained an unseen tail – giving him the appearance of Greek faun.

Matilda blinks and tries to focus, but the gates are closed behind them.

#

The unsettling experience in the Niche Gardens continues to plague James' mind. His time there already seems foggy and disjointed even to his own recollection, as if he is recounting a dream he cannot quite remember, and did not quite enjoy. And yet… what he saw, with his own eyes. What he heard. All of it felt so real. He could almost reach out and touch his family again.

No, he reminds himself. *They're gone. Because of you.*

By the time they reach the next section of the Spire, evening has fallen on the mountain. In the growing darkness, he can see Hank's Castle looming above – another aspect of his past, taunting him.

The castle sits high atop the summit overlooking green grassland. Immediately surrounding the king's estate are large, verdant fields and small huddled clusters of villages. All seem to be decorated as if for a festival – and most likely, all are vying for Hank's regal attentions.

Matilda points to a pavilion near them. "Looks like they're set up for some kind of celebration."

They come upon a big festival sign that proclaims *Cargo Cult Carnival.* The streets are filled with people wearing masks and costumes. Even from a distance, it looks like there is a grand masquerade in town.

Matilda inspects her blades, nested in the sheaths sewn to the inner linings of her clothing. "I guess we're crashing the party."

James checks his pistol, then holsters it.

"I think this is Hank's way of greeting us. It's certainly his style. Stay alert, though – we're not even at the castle yet."

Watchfully, they enter the village proper and wind their way through the gathering crowds, more or less maintaining their bearing towards the ominous palace looming above. James scrutinizes each of the town's denizens with a wary eye. The more he observes, the more evident the pattern becomes.

"Interesting." He mutters.

"What?" Matilda says, similarly surveying the costumed throng.

"It's weird. Everyone seems like they're formed into groups of similar entertainers."

He nods in the direction of a pratfall of clowns wearing motley and tight jester's breeches, mimicking passers-by. They cavort as a

group, but they do not give particular encouragement when one of their own performs. Stoic expressions form on their faces when one of their number tries to outperform the rest. One of the jesters makes eye contact with James and immediately smiles wide. Winking jauntily at the Taciturn, the man starts frantically juggling five oranges.

Matilda moans in disgust. “Ugh. *Super* creepy.”

James scans the rest of the performance groups in close proximity. “Yeah, you can say that again. For entertainers, they don’t seem to be having much fun.”

They pass a group of girls wearing patchwork dresses with bright red rouge on their cheeks. While balancing on their toes, they hand out fliers to passers-by. When one of the girls slips and falls to the ground, the rest in her group immediately stop their work. They instantly flock around her in a huddle, their backs to the crowd. James and Matilda see a flurry of movement. An instant later, the girls are back in their places – minus the girl that fell.

Matilda makes a small, startled sound. “Yeah, okay. This place officially gives me the creeps. Let’s get through this fast.”

James pushes forward through the milling crowds. “I agree.”

They soon find the central square, filled with barkers, booths and games of chance.

“Holy shit—”

Matilda points to a pit boss and his security guards as they manhandle a gambler – presumably an accused cheat – and summarily drag him behind one of the tents. There are sounds of a brief, savage struggle. Spatters of red stain the canvas.

Matilda’s whole body tenses, a snake coiling to strike. “What the fuck is wrong with this place?” she hisses, edging closer to James.

James leads them past another group of performers, making certain that the Scry is still close at his side.

“It’s like some sort of competition ground. Everyone’s vying for a top spot. Hoping to get noticed by Hank”

He watches as the pit crew returns from behind the tent flap, unceremoniously wiping blood off their blades. Matilda tracks them intently, hand twitching towards her own arsenal of sheathed steel, but James extends a restraining arm.

“We’re not here for that.”

Matilda backs down but vents her anger, tracking the progress of the killers across the square with her eyes.

“This place is sick. These people are sick. Hank is fucking sick.”

James finds his own muscles tensing as the words leave her mouth. From the look on Matilda’s face, she clearly doesn’t care if she’s heard. The same can’t be said for everyone else in the town center.

The entire crowd has stopped all performances as one, staring at the Taciturn and Scry. The boisterous gathering is now completely silent.

The throng parts to make way for a man holding a golden scepter and ornate purple robes. He's followed by a medieval-themed entourage. Mockingly, the leader claps as he steps forward, giving James and Matilda a displeased look.

"Well, well, well. Look at these two. Making it all the way to the top in less than a day. Quite a trend. A fucking sensation on the platform, it would seem."

Matilda snorts, and lets out a jeering laugh.

"This is Hank?!" She half-turns to face James in disbelief.

James shifts his body, his hand poised to go for his holster.

"No. For Christ's sake, no. I have no clue who this idiot is."

Insulted, the leader puffs out his chest.

"It doesn't surprise me that two people who climbed up so fast don't know enough to honor those who came before them. I'm Bill the Magnificent. You'll be better off if you learn to respect that name."

Matilda and James share an unimpressed look. The Scry has already unsheathed one of her blades. It gleams in one rock-steady hand.

"And why exactly should we do that?"

Bill puffs his chest yet again and motions to the gathering crowd of onlookers.

"I am one of Hank's Dukes, and a three-time recipient of the King's Banner of Recognition!"

Bill tugs on a bright red sash that adorns his already-garish raiment.

"They were given to me by the King himself, in recognition of my excellence!"

Bill looks past Matilda and James, addressing the crowd in its entirety, filling his lungs for a good shout.

"Let this be a sign to all the products of the Spire. Through your own deeds, you can lift yourself up. The path is hard, but not without rewards!"

Matilda subtly shifts her grip on the handle of her knife.

"Is that right?"

Letting go of his sash, Bill returns his attention to the Taciturn and Scry. He lowers his voice so the crowd at large can't hear.

"Yes, I'm right hand to the King. So, you two want to slow your trending and learn your place."

Matilda steps towards Bill and points at his sash. "Seems to me that if everyone's so focused on these Banners of Bullshit, no one is busy trying to dethrone your precious King."

Bill's face turns red with indignation.

"What the hell would you know about it, girl? You haven't even been here one day! Someday I'll be Hank's successor, and I'll let you pass over my dead body."

Bill the Magnificent unsheathes an ostentatiously-ornamented sword and his guards step forward. Brandishing weapons ranging from maces to spiked cudgels to crossbows, they form ranks, blocking the path to the castle.

James takes several steps backwards.

"This doesn't have to end this way…"

But something blurs past James before he can finish.

In a flash, Matilda is already plunging her blades into the nearest mace-bearing guard. He dies before his face can even register surprise. With a growl, she lunges for the next one, who makes one clumsy parry with his cudgel and never uses it again. Recoiling in gibbering terror, Bill the Magnificent hastily falls back behind his sworn swords.

In those first few seconds of one-sided butchery, the only sound is that of the struggle between Matilda and Bill's guards. The crowd stands rooted in stunned silence. They look on aghast as Matilda carves her way through the first few guards without opposition. No words are spoken. James calls out, but Matilda continues her onslaught. The people in the crowd gawp at one another then back at Matilda's relentless assault on Bill's court.

And then, a single voice blurts what everyone is thinking.

"If she kills Bill, Hank will need a new Duke—"

It takes a few seconds for the utterance to sink in – but it's the match that ignites the powder-keg. A knife juggler looks at a clown next to him and unceremoniously shoves his blades in the other entertainer's chest. A few more seconds of silence pass as everyone comprehends what has just happened. Suddenly, a mime grabs a spear from the second of the fallen guards and hurls it at a dancer from spitting-distance. With the impact, the rest of the square explodes into chaotic violence as each costumed reveler simultaneously sees a golden, wild-eyed opportunity to soar through the ranks of the Spire, surging up the trending-ratings on a geyser of opportunity, ambition and blood.

A painter holding a pike charges at James. Drawing on him in half a second, the Taciturn blows the man's head off, sending a gout of brain matter and data into the surging mass of bodies behind him. James advances into the chaos, following Matilda.

The Scry presses forward, scything down the decreasing numbers of Bill's retreating court, slicing her way through the increasing brawl. A woman comes howling at her with a butcher's hook, and Matilda stabs her in the chest. Deflecting a clumsy sword-thrust from her left,

she sweeps the legs out from under a would-be knight in improvised armor, who clatters noisily to the ground, losing his helmet. Matilda pounces on him and slits the man's throat.

As the melee escalates, James finds it harder to track Matilda's position. He ducks and weaves through the slaughter, avoiding attackers when he can, ending them at point-blank range when he cannot. A hammer-wielding circus clown smashes a gambler's head. One of the dancing girls jumps on the back of a security guard, jamming her pins into his neck again and again as his blood jets into the skirmishing crowd.

James whirls on a blur of peripheral motion and finds himself face to face with the juggler encountered earlier. He has traded his five ripe oranges for a bloody mace. Seeing the Taciturn, he charges with it, snarling. James puts three rounds into the man's chest, steps over the body, and frantically scans the anarchy for Matilda. James spots the Scry fighting her way up the nearby stairs, mowing down the dwindling remnant of Bill's court.

James moves past a dancer strangling a bell-capped DJ with the cords of his own headphones. Sensing motion to his left and instinctively ducking, James hears and feels a throwing-axe whicker through the air just over his head. Even with his training and augmentation-mods, tracking this much combat- data is an overload waiting to happen.

James finally spots Matilda tearing through the last of Bill the Magnificent's guards.

Cursing, James jams his pistol into its holster and pulls out a CQB SMG from his bag's digital inventory. Keeping the stairs in sight, the Taciturn advances in a crouch, cutting through the crowd with short, controlled bursts. He drops a man dressed like a chess pawn and a gambler wielding a makeshift flail. While the weapon's sound makes his presence known, the sheer stopping-power quickly mows a swath through the crowd, clearing his path.

Reaching the stairs, the Taciturn pauses, releases the spent magazine, slaps a fresh one in, and races up the stairs two at a time. At the top, James finds the trail of the Scry's carnage. He has only taken two steps when a clown's hand grabs at his ankle and swings a knife for his knees. Jumping back, James puts a burst of rounds into the assailant's face, leaving only paint-smeared gore and a shredded, smoking wig.

Now fearing the worst, James rushes after Matilda, following the trail of blood and guts. Weapon raised, he rounds the corner and stops in his tracks.

Matilda has cornered Bill the Magnificent and the single remaining member of his cohort – a woman in a tattered pink dress.

“Protect your Duke!” Bill yells as he shoves the woman towards Matilda. Matilda drives her blade into the woman’s heart, killing her instantly. She lets the woman’s body fall and advances, focused on her target to the exclusion of all else.

“Please, no! Look, you can be next in line – I can help you with your popularity!”

Bill stumbles backwards, hands extended, but trips over his feet and lands on his back.

James calls out, but it’s already too late. Matilda lunges at Bill.

“You think you run this place, Hank? You think you can just sit back and watch people do this to each other?”

Confusion mixes with the terror on Bill’s face.

“What? What are you talking about? I’m not—”

Matilda buries her knife in his chest and slowly pulls the blade out. Bill sputters and wheezes.

“All those kids living in filth are supposed to join in on this madness?”

The blade enters and exits.

“You think people like carving things about themselves into trees?”

A second blade joins the first, enters the ritualistic piercing of flesh.

“You think it’s funny, watching people kill themselves to get to the top? What’s the matter, Hank, why aren’t you laughing? This should be hilarious.”

Both blades come out, both blades go back in.

“You think can just buy us off with your little magic housing-tract? You want to take him away from me?”

Tears start running down Matilda’s cheeks. She leaves the knives in and begins to punch Bill’s face.

Smack

“People aren’t products.”

Smack. Smack.

“People aren’t playthings.”

Smack.

By the time James reaches Matilda, Bill’s face is unrecognizable pulp. The body still twitches. The Scry’s blades, buried to the hilt, jut from the fatal stab wounds. Matilda pounds at the corpse’s chest, exhausted, further bloodying her fists.

No words come to the Taciturn. He has failed to see the anger and frustration mounting on their journey until this moment. Proof of everything he might need to know about her hatred and loathing for this place, for everything it represents, lies at his feet – battered, mutilated, leaking.

All he can do is place a hand on her shoulder as she slumps, her breath hitching, weary and shattered.

Inside the Castle atop the Spire, a king prepares for the coming of his long-awaited visitors.

Chapter 16: “A Game of Chess”

Firmly gripping his SMG, Taciturn makes his way through the dark halls of Hank’s palace. He supports the Scry with his free arm. The labyrinthine sprawl of the palace’s opulent halls allows them some measure of stealth and evasion. They successfully sneak past a patrol of guards, and then another. The bloody pandemonium outside the castle walls has drawn most of the patrols to the perimeter defenses, to look on with what can only be called a kind of horrified excitement.

As they ascend a sweeping staircase arrayed with statues, Taciturn weighs the lavish decor of the palace against the squalid slums at the base of the Spire. All of the System’s benefits hoarded by one man with regal delusions – and that man spurring his desperate subjects on by tempting them with the faintest taste of such palatial opulence. Covered in blood and uncommunicative, Matilda leans on James as they clamber up the stairs. He can sense the anger still seething within her.

He continues to tell himself there’s still a chance to save Hank – if he’s not too far gone.

The staircase finally ends in a small antechamber with high ceilings and a marble fountain exactingly crafted in the image of the Spire. Water runs down from the miniature castle at the top, but the fountain’s features continually shift and distort as the water flows over them – a scaled-down reflection of the ever-changing layout of the Spire itself.

Beyond the fountain, in what can only be considered a throne room, sits Hank Brown on an ornate ivory chair. The golden crown on his head doesn’t conceal the thin, grey hairs it rests on. Red, flowing robes billow over his sumptuous emerald tunic. Hank’s grin only accentuates his already well-defined facial features. At first, James takes comfort in the smile. Then he finally registers the piercing intensity behind the ruler’s eyes.

“James Reynolds. It’s been some time, hasn’t it?”

James remains silent, holding Hank’s gaze, searching for a sign of the person he once knew. Hank’s demeanor isn’t threatening, but his eyes do not blink, staying locked on James and Matilda.

Trying to contain his alarm and concern, James slowly crouches, places his weapon on the ground and stands straight again, hands raised. Beside him, Matilda stays motionless, silent. James does not know if this is good or bad.

“It has, Hank. I’m sure you know why we’re here.”

The ruler’s unexpected, booming laughter echoes through the

hall.

"Of course I do! What kind of ruler would I be, if I didn't know what happens in my realm?"

Edging slightly to shield Matilda with his body, James scans the room for any potential ambush, but the only occupants in evidence are a king, a Scry, and a Taciturn.

"So, what'll it be, Hank? You want to give me the key, or do we need to do this the hard way?" Even as the words hit the air, James marvels at how un-Taciturn they sound to his own ears. They may as well have been spoken by Matilda.

Hank Brown's boisterous laughter ceases abruptly, and James curses under his breath. The Scry's directness has rubbed off on him. James cautions himself to maintain his Taciturn nature.

The Spire's ruler stands up from his throne.

"And by 'hard way', I'm assuming you mean what you did to Virginia?"

James opens his mouth, but Hank interrupts.

"No matter. We're not going to do this your way *or* the hard way. We're going to do this *MY* way. We'll play a game. If you beat me, I'll give you the key willingly."

James takes a few careful steps towards his old friend, slowly lowering his hands.

"Look, Hank…"

The king cuts him off with a dismissive flick of his hand.

"We do it this way, or not at all."

Hank removes his crown and it morphs in his hands, shifting into a golden band – the key.

"We play by my rules, or I'll destroy it."

James stops his approach.

"You wouldn't. It's one of the four keys to the System. Even you aren't that crazy."

Hank's smile, far from friendly, widens with an abrupt, startling glee.

"Do you want to test that statement?"

The king snaps his fingers, and the throne room floor instantly transmutes into a grid of painted squares. Half white, half purple.

"If you win, you get my crown. If you don't, I keep it. And to show you there's no animosity between old friends, you'll be free to go regardless of the outcome. Though, I'm sure you're close to indexation as it is." Clasping his hands together, he adds, "But I guess that will afford us more time to catch up, won't it?"

James looks around the empty room.

"Is that what this is about, Hank? I'm sure it's pretty isolated up here. I wouldn't mind visiting, after you've given—"

The harshness returns to Hank's voice instantly. His face contorts with anger, but somehow, he still doesn't blink.

"You think *that's* why I put you through all of this? Because I'm *lonely?"*

James takes a chastised step back, nodding, palms out at shoulder height.

"All right, Hank. I get it. It's cool. Let's do it your way. Let's play a game."

Hank's anger fades at once into a benevolent, serene smile. Under the fixed gaze of his unblinking eyes, it is a terrible smile. The king claps his hands. Identical, colorless chess pieces assume their ranks on the floor's grid.

"Excellent. Now, I've added a bit of flavor to our game. What better way to demonstrate a battle in the Cyberside than Babylon versus Metropolis? You know how those two are always fighting. So, here is a little plot twist: Each figure actually represents someone – from either Donovan Craze or Tom Simmons' organizations."

The pieces closest to James turn purple; Hank's turn white. The King gestures to the purple pieces.

"Seeing as you're already working with Donovan, it seems only fitting to give you his people."

Taciturn touches the closest piece, and an image flares in his mind: In Babylon, a security guard patrols the streets of North Hollywood.

Hank continues. "Now, now. You should hear everything before we start. I have access to directories throughout the Cyberside. Whatever happens on the board is *happening to these people in real time."*

Despite the vividness of the images, James can't hide his disbelief.

"There's no way. You don't have access to other domains."

The comment seems to irritate Hank, and he jabs a finger at the Taciturn.

"Don't underestimate what I can do from this castle. Donovan and Simmons always underestimate me. Don't fool yourself, James. I've dealt with enough third-party development to have backdoors into other people's software. These are real people, and I strongly suggest you start taking this seriously."

Hank's words seem to shake Matilda from her stupor. She makes a sound from behind him, and steps forward to stand at his side.

"No! Enough is enough! You can't treat people like this, you monster!"

James throws an arm out to restrain her, but it is too late.

Matilda charges for Hank, drawing her knives. The Spire's king remains calm and unblinking, even as she lunges for the kill. He

smiles as an invisible barrier freezes Matilda in midair, gleaming blades in both of her hands.

At a loss for words, James looks at the former Fall Water Lake executive, draped in his royal vestments.

"Why all the theatrics, Hank?"

The ruler moves thoughtfully around the suspended Scry with an air of fascination.

"I'm trying to remind you, James, that building worlds and playing God isn't just creation. It's equal parts destruction. You want to rebuild this world, prove that you have what it takes."

Taciturn takes a long look at Matilda in her silent stasis, and then wordlessly removes his coat, placing it on the floor. James gets the sinking feeling, verging on despair, that his friend is well and truly lost – but he's not willing to give up on him just yet.

Rolling up his sleeves, he tries to recall his opponent's play style.

Hank nods with excitement. "Good. You have the first move."

Taciturn scans the board. "Pawn, E2 to E4."

An image appears on the piece's surface as it moves forward. James sees a Company security guard moving through a train in Babylon.

Across the gridded throne room floor, Hank shakes his head. "Predictable, as always. Pawn B7 to B6."

The piece lights up. An Enclave engineer stops to get coffee. The back and forth continues, their respective gambits taking shape, until James can finally launch his first attack.

"F3 to E5, knight takes pawn."

The pawn – a low-level enforcer for Simmons's organization – leaves a bar, weaving- drunk. As he stumbles down a service alley, two unseen men grab the enforcer and stab him repeatedly. The entire violent outrage is vicious, pointless, and over in seconds. James can smell the wet pavement and hear the man's final ragged, wheezing gasps as he is left for dead in a pile of garbage. James reels, flails for balance and drops hard to one knee on the throne room's new killing-floor.

"What just—"

Hank shakes his head, uttering a disappointed scoffing noise. "I told you James, every figure is a life. You should have listened to me more carefully and been more careful with your board. C7 to F4. White queen takes bishop."

"Wait, *wait—"* James protests, holding out a hand as if to ward off a blow.

Sitting in a restaurant, one of Donovan's lieutenants talks on his phone. The man fails to notice the server who brings his food, nor does he notice the strange taste. At first. Gurgling, the man collapses

on the table, scattering utensils, plates, and food in all directions. He is briefly, dimly aware of the faces of startled patrons, turning to regard his plight.

Even after the scene fades completely, James can still feel the confusion and fear in the lieutenant's final moments. A cold, fading, phantom miasma of copper and ozone and—

"This… this is *wrong,* Hank."

Hank crosses his arms.

"How so, James? You've never shied away from killing. On the contrary, as a Taciturn, I'd say you've gone about it rather aggressively. Making it your mission to end the lives of others, with extreme fervor."

James' voice wavers, "That's different. I fought slavers. Monsters…"

Hank regards Matilda, suspended in her murderous rush.

"Hmmm… is that so?"

James' hand starts flexing as the pressure in his head builds. He can see the SMG on the floor beside him and briefly, vividly envisions the quickest solution to his current problem. He pushes the thought away but loses a rook in his distraction. Somewhere in Babylon, a Corporation refueling station explodes, taking its nightwatchman with it. With the loss of his knight, two Company guards are gunned down in their patrol cruiser.

Hank groans with dissatisfaction.

"You're proving to be an inept opponent, James. You used to give me some semblance of a challenge." Hank scans the board. "Aside from racking up quite the body count in Babylon, your strategy is lacking."

James curses. Hank gets a good chuckle out of it.

"Take your time, Taciturn. No chess-clock here. No sense in rushing it."

James glares at the man across from him.

"These are people's lives."

Hank's voice is cold and direct, his gaze fixed, reptilian.

"Lives of people who work for villains. I don't understand, James. You had no problem killing that guard in Babylon. Or was that easier because *she* did it?"

The king steps closer to the Scry, examining her.

Shadows seem to pool on the ruler's face, his expression becoming dark, unreadable. "Are you willing to sacrifice these people for the greater good? Or is it more honorable when you're pulling the trigger? Stop kidding yourself, James, and play the goddamn game."

Concentrating on the board, Taciturn shuts out the images on the pieces. A few moves later, the white knight falls and an Enclave

enforcer dies in a firefight. James sacrifices a pawn but takes down Hank's queen a turn later. While a low-level security guard is beaten to death in Babylon, Simmons' Chief of Security is strangled in her sleep in Metropolis.

Hank grins in dark glee at the shifting balance.

"Hmpf – I guess there's a bit of the old you still in there."

More pieces fall, as do bodies throughout the Cyberside. The board, now swept clean of all but the last few combatants, leaves both players with limited strategies. With Hank having failed to reckon with James' remaining knight, an opening for checkmate presents itself. James moves the knight, fighting the urge to smile.

Hank reviews the board in silence, pacing – looking from his pieces, back to James' knight, and back again. Confident now in his decision, James allows himself a grin. It quickly fades, however, when Hank pauses and smirks. He makes his next move, repositioning a rook to be senselessly sacrificed – delaying James' victory by one turn.

Hank shrugs indifferently. "Your turn."

Exasperated, James groans, fixing the Platform King with a cold stare. "You're really going to make me take another piece? Just concede the game, already!"

The ruler of the Spire stares back at him, silently.

Infuriated, James growls, "Whatever, *fuck* you. I won."

James captures Hank's rook and a fresh flood of images deluges his mind. As an Enclave worker pulls into her driveway, a van turns its lights on down the street. A young girl races out the front door; a van accelerates down the road. Their loving embrace is cut short by gun fire. While the van speeds away, the girl kneels in shock and horror as the blood of her parents flows into the gutter.

The images fade, and James collapses to the floor in anguish.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

Shaking his head in his imperious robes, Hank stares down at him.

"For Christ's sake, you nuked *everyone* in Neverland without blinking an eye – but now one child's life is ruined, and you break down? What the hell is wrong with *you*? Don't be dumb enough to think you can win without consequences."

Hank moves to the immobilized Matilda.

"Your decisions, however slight, can have far-reaching effects. Effects you might never know. If you succeed at what you're planning, will the body count be worth it?"

Hank slowly circles Matilda.

"A deal is a deal. And to be honest, I'm somewhat relieved. When you've done this for so long…"

Having completed his pass around Matilda, Hank stops in front of

her.

“I wish you luck on your adventure, James. Part of me hopes you’ll make it, but that really depends on what you’ve learned here.”

The king takes his eyes off the Scry and looks over at the Taciturn.

“I’m not an unsportsmanlike loser, and I don’t expect you to walk all the way down.” While James pushes himself to his feet, a portal manifests in the throne room. “Also, don’t let it be said I’m not a man of my word.”

The King spins the golden band in his hand. “Here, give it to the girl.” Hanks tosses the band to James and repositions himself in front of Matilda.

James starts crossing the board towards the Scry and the king.

“Hank, this doesn’t have to end like this.”

Hank examines Matilda’s eyes and finally blinks his own.

“The game can’t end until you take the king.” Hank turns his attention back to his old friend and offers a weak smile. “Give it to the girl. Just… just remind her that it’s heavy.”

The barrier holding Matilda disappears, and she continues her lunge forward. The Scry’s knives sink into Hank’s chest, causing him to tumble backwards and slam to the floor.

Matilda stands over the king’s still-smiling face. Two of her blades are buried to the hilt, a centimeter apart, in the rapidly-reddening spot on his chest. Matilda pulls out two more of her blades and moves closer.

Hank’s bloodied, pained, choked, wheezing attempt at a smile stops her.

“Better… hurry, love. Without a king, there’s no realm… and since you’re not sticking around…”

The walls and ceiling of the palace begin to shudder and buckle. Outside the throne room, the statues flanking the sweeping staircase can be heard tumbling down the stone steps and shattering.

Matilda turns to regard James and the floor-spanning chess board.

“Wait, what?”

James motions towards the wavering portal.

“Come on. We need to go.”

Matilda spots the band in James’ hand.

“So, you got…?”

The Taciturn looks at the body of Hank, now motionless.

“I got it.”

Together they jump through the portal as the castle falls to ruin.

Chapter 17: “New Jersey”

James and Matilda hit the cold, hard ground as the portal collapses behind them. The back-channel transportation line Hank sent them through has instantly transported them miles away from the Spire. James rolls down his sleeves and realizes he’s left his coat and SMG in Hank’s palace. Picking up his bag, James evaluates the surrounding forest. He needs time to process the chess game, but there’s an immediate problem that needs solving first.

“We need to figure out where we are.”

Without his jacket, James is acutely aware of the abrupt change in weather. The sky is thick with grey clouds and the sporadic booming of distant, rolling thunder. There is no trace of the sun, and a static energy clings to the air. Even from this distance, he can still see the hazy image of the Spire commanding the horizon, its summit lost in a dark lightning storm.

James walks through the sparse trees. Matilda following him in silence, until they reach a cliff’s edge jutting out over a valley far below. Scanning the basin, James spots a service road snaking its way along the valley floor.

“When they’re not busy fighting Babylon, the Enclave focuses its efforts on settlement expansion. Luckily, all their outposts are connected by a uniform train communicator.”

He walks along the edge of the cliff, looking for a feasible way down.

Matilda maintains her silence, staring back at the Spire in the distance.

James continues. “It’s like a transportation hub that connects larger areas. If you can access one of the entry points, it takes you to the local hub. From a local hub, you can bounce around to another hub. It’s all interconnected, but very compartmentalized, in case they need to lock a section down in the event of an emergency. If I were to guess, we should be able to find a station somewhere on the other side of those mountains.”

James is still searching for a way down when he realizes Matilda isn’t behind him. He quickly joins the Scry where she is still standing, gazing out towards the Spire.

“What is it? Do you see something?”

There’s a strange glow in her eyes when she turns to him.

“I’m sorry.” She moves a little closer to him but stops. “I know he was your friend, but—”

James isn’t ready to have this conversation yet, but hears himself say, “But, you’re sorry?”

Matilda kicks a rock off the edge of the cliff.

"For killing him, no. I'm just… *sorry,* if it makes…" she trails off and grunts, clutching double handfuls of air in frustration.

Taciturn puts a hand up to stop her.

"Let's not do this now. I think I see a way down, but we have to get moving." James moves towards the edge, but Matilda's voice stops him.

"Wait."

James stops and stares at her, not even bothering to hide his frustration.

"I needed to say 'I'm sorry' before I ask you the next thing. Hank's crown… you have it, right?"

It takes James a long, chilly moment to process her request. Looking down, he's surprised to find himself still holding the band. He turns it around in his hands, absently rubbing the gold with his thumb.

Matilda takes a deep breath.

"It's just, I gotta unlock more about me, you know? It seems everyone we encounter knows more about my life than I do. After Neverland, I saw glimpses of myself from Virginia's band. With all the information Hank had from ruling the Spire, it's *got* to kick something loose, right?"

James understands fully what she's asking. But the timing bothers him.

"So, was that what all that anger was about? You just wanted Hank's crown?"

The Scry withdraws a step, stung.

"What are you talking about? We always needed the key, and he was no better than Virginia. If anything, Hank was *worse.* You saw what he put those people through. I'm sorry he was your friend once… but he became a monster."

James grips the band tighter. "So, what does that make us? You never told me what you planned to do in Neverland. Did you know the Lifesync would absorb *everyone*?"

He sees Matilda's fists clench, her eyes water. James knows he's stepping too far, but the words continue to rush out of him now, of their own accord.

"All those people, Matilda…"

She yells. "You think I don't understand that? All their memories are in my head, constantly reminding me! I'm *horrified* by it, okay? But you knew what you were signing up for, traveling with a Scry. I'm sorry I put such a dirty mark on your perfect Taciturn record."

James closes his eyes and sucks in a breath, trying to hammer his emotions into something that won't make things any worse. Her anger

at Hank now makes more sense. “Matilda, I… I understand that Hank couldn’t be saved. You’re right. The goal was always the key – but do you really need it right now?”

Matilda steps forward.

“If not now, then when? Wasn’t the point of everything we’ve done to get those keys and unlock who I am?”

The conversation is starting to remind James just how genuinely terrible he was at talking to his own son.

“We’ve both been through a lot. This can wait until we get to Metropolis.”

This time, she raises her voice.

“No, it really can’t. That’s what I’m telling you. I need time to process these things and as soon as we get into Metropolis, we’ll be dealing with Simmons. Do you really think we’ll find time to handle this there?”

Her outburst triggers one of his own. James gestures to the wilderness around them, waving the golden crown at the trees, at the sky.

“Yeah, because doing this here in the forest makes total sense!”

Matilda extends two middle fingers at the Taciturn.

“Fuck you, James. Don’t talk down to me like I’m a child. If it weren’t for me, you’d *still* be trying to get into Donovan’s tower!”

Deep down, he knows she’s right, but James can’t admit it right now. He’s done his best to avoid getting worked up, and his emotions are already strained. James raises his hands again, trying to stop things from escalating further.

“You’re right. You should explore the band before heading into Metropolis, *but we can’t do it here.* The first place that makes sense, we’ll stop. But for now, we keep going.”

Her glare is irritated, but a repressed grunt lets James know she’s stepped down from the fight. For now.

James shakes his head and resumes walking, before any more words can find their way out of his mouth. Reluctantly, she falls in behind him.

Carefully making their way down the cliff, James pushes a path through the trees and bushes to the service road. Trying to look everywhere at once, he steps out onto the trail.

“We need to be careful. We could be close to an Enclave outpost. Stay alert.”

James doesn’t hear Matilda respond, but her footsteps close behind him are acknowledgement enough.

Walking along the road, a sense of dread begins to dawn on James, and it takes him several minutes to pin it down. It’s the silence. There’s usually some level of ambient nature-chatter to help mask

footsteps – birdsong, bugs, frogs, *some*thing – but the farther they follow the road, the quieter it becomes. The reason for the eerie silence eludes him until he spots something obstructing their way. He stops dead in his tracks.

Enclave barricades block parts of the road ahead, and a chain link fence extends through the trees in both directions. A layer of moss on the barricades gives mute testament to approximately how long they've obstructed this particular road. However, James quickly marks some conspicuously-fresh repairs in the chain link – indicators that this area is still patrolled and maintained. Starkly-lettered, unfriendly Enclave signage hangs from the fence at regular intervals. *Quarantine. Off Limits. Category 10 Violation for Trespassing.*

If the Enclave fear this location, James has a skin-crawling suspicion as to where he and the Scry must be. He is suddenly, soberly terrified. His fears are confirmed mere seconds later, when he notices a sign beyond the barricades that looks much older than any of the Enclave's work. The green and white paint is faded, but he can still make out the letters: ***Welcome to Wharton State Park.***

"What?" Matilda mutters, looking from his face to the faded sign and back again. "What's wrong?"

James feels his hand trying to flex on its own, but he fights the impulse in order to find and light a much-needed cigarette. "Well, the good news is, we're on track to find a station."

Matilda approaches the barricades with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

"And the bad news?"

James rests a hand on his holstered pistol and scans the tree line.

"The bad news is, it's on the other side of Wharton State Forest. I've heard rumors of something out in this forest, but I've never been this way before myself. There are stories of people going into these woods, and coming out… *different.* After a while, they just wandered back in, and were never seen again. And if the Enclave is unwilling to go in…"

Matilda rests a hand on her hip.

"Are you telling me there's a witch in the woods or something?"

James frowns when he notices an even more glaringly evident rent in the moss-grown chain-link fence.

"It's probably just an anomaly." He doesn't sound particularly convinced.

Matilda kicks at one of the barricades, fragmenting an especially furry accumulation of moss.

"Isn't that your specialty, handling anomalies?"

Ignoring the slight venom in her tone, James turns around and looks back at the service road. He doubts they'll be able to avoid any

Enclave patrols if they head back in that direction. Turning back to the barricades, he focuses again on the torn section of fence. James mutters, "Yeah, but nothing like this."

Matilda starts moving towards the barrier.

James continues, "Anything that has the Enclave this obviously concerned shouldn't be taken lightly. The only other good news I can think is, Simmons' men should stay clear of the area."

Matilda continues trudging towards the gap in the fence.

"Great. So we just make our way through the haunted forest, no problem. With everything we've been through, you act like this is going to be tough."

James moves after her.

"Just keep quiet. If there is anything out here, let's not grab its attention."

Passing through the fence, they walk along the side of the road, ready to retreat to the tree line if anything unpleasant comes their way. The only sound that breaks the unnatural silence is the occasional rumble of distant thunder.

#

Matilda doesn't know how long they've been walking. She doesn't know how long it's been since they passed the Enclave's barricades. All she knows is that the band is still in James' hand, and her frustrations are mounting. Hank was a monster.

"Just like me," she whispers.

She saw red when James brought up Neverland, because she hasn't been able to stop thinking about it. The plan had always been to absorb Virginia… but she had never wanted to tell James about it. The Taciturn had shown how uncomfortable he was with her Scry powers.

But the whole *city*…

Hank, on the other hand – that had been an opportunity to make things right. To free all those people from his oppression. But when the big moment came – she'd been frozen out of it. Now she finds herself unable to clean her slate, *and* she has managed to piss off what could very well be her only friend.

"Still, he can be a real *jerk,"* she mutters, to any of the trees that care to listen.

Trapped in her own head, Matilda steps on a fallen, decaying log. A loud *CRACK* echoes through the silent forest. Before the sound fades, Matilda knows what's coming next – the glaring, condescending face of the Taciturn. Sure enough, when she looks up, it's waiting for

her.

Unable or unwilling to deescalate the tension between, Matilda figures she might as well pitch in her two cents.

"What? Didn't you say Simmons' people should avoid this forest? So, what should we be afraid of? If there are any anomalies, you said it yourself, you've fought monsters before. What makes this one any different?"

James retraces his steps back to Matilda, and she's surprised when he doesn't reprimand her. There is some actual concern mixed with the sober seriousness in his voice.

"Alright, I'm going to tell you this, even though I know you're not going to take it seriously."

James glances past her, scanning the forest for some as-yet-unseen adversary.

"Please, just take this seriously."

Matilda mockingly raises a hand.

"Yeah, okay. Scouts' honor."

James leans against a tree.

"Do you know the story of the Jersey Devil?"

Matilda fights back the urge to laugh.

"You mean the flying *goat?"*

James exhales through clenched teeth and lowers his head.

"Yeah, no. Not that. Everyone knows that one. The real legend is about a pioneer woman who had twelve children. Pregnant with the thirteenth, she said, 'the Devil can take this one.' She may have said it in jest, but the way the story goes, when the child was born, it took the form of a horrible creature that escaped to torment the countryside."

Matilda plays with the handle of a knife sheathed inside her vest.

"Okay, but we're still fighting a monster, aren't we? I'm sure you have something in that Bag of Holding of yours to blow it away."

She studies his face as he continues to scan the woods.

"Everyone assumes it's a single creature, but it's more than that. This place messes with your mind. A monster is one thing, but these woods have a… a *presence.* Powerful enough to make people abandon their homes, and even have the whole Enclave lock it down."

The unnatural stillness of the forest is beginning to get on her nerves, too.

"Fine. Whatever. I'll be more careful. Let's just find some place to hole up soon."

As they continue, Matilda second guesses making light of the situation. She's technically a monster… and too many people have certainly underestimated her.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Matilda piles face-first into James, who

has stopped cold, holding up a cautioning hand.

"*Umphf*. What gives—?"

She sees it before he can respond. A path to the left, deviating from the main road, and yet another sign. Rusted and covered in dirt, it indicates that there is a ranger station half a mile away. Flustered, James cautiously continues down the main road.

"There shouldn't be anything out here. We should just keep going."

Ignoring him, Matilda bears down the path leading to the ranger station.

"This is probably worth checking out. Besides, you said we'd stop when we 'found something'. This is 'something'."

James shakes his head. "I really don't think we should."

Matilda waves her hands around her ears, as if shooing insects or bats. . "Either you're coming with me or you're not." His grumbling lets Matilda know he's following.

When they arrive at the ranger station, it doesn't look like much. Moss and corrosion cover the signs, and the forest has done its best to reclaim the land. Despite its derelict state, Matilda thinks there's a kind of solitary beauty to the woodland building. Just not enough to stop her instinctively reaching for a knife when she hears James unholster his pistol.

Clipping Hank's key to his belt, James motions with his free hand towards the station. The two quickly cover the ground between them and the house. Peering through the begrimed windowpanes, it's impossible to make out anything on the inside. Counting down in the air with his fingers, James turns the handle, opens the door, and creeps into the darkness. With blades drawn, Matilda enters the station and is immediately stunned by the overpoweringly musky odor of the interior. Letting her eyes adjust to the darkness, she searches the room for any sign of threat. Their sweeps of the subsequent rooms reveal only more rotting wood and debris.

Sheathing her blades, Matilda makes her way back into the main room. James holsters his pistol, "It looks clear, but stay on your toes."

She doesn't mask the annoyance in her voice "Sure."

James moves towards the window and looks out the same dirty glass.

"There's a room at the end of the hall if you need it. Maybe you might want to change."

Matilda frowns.

"Yeah, that was my plan."

James finally makes eye contact with her.

"What?"

Matilda shakes her head. "You still have it, James."

James looks down at the golden band clipped to his belt. With unconcealed hesitation, he hands Hank's key over to her.

"Look just… just be careful."

She snatches the key from his outstretched hand.

"I'm not going to *break* it, James."

Spinning on her heel, she tromps back down the hallway. She makes it halfway before she hears him speak.

"I wasn't talking about the band."

She stops momentarily but continues towards the adjacent room. Once inside, she closes the door and tosses the band onto the ancient, sagging bed. First things first – she needs to change into some fresh clothes. Then she'll unlock the mysteries of Hank's key.

#

The Taciturn sighs, thankful to have a moment to himself. His mind has been running a million miles a minute, and it's time to throttle back a bit. Despite its lamentable condition and likely degree of filth, a battered sofa chair beckons to him from one of the room's dingier corners. First, he goes to the window for a quick look outside.

He doesn't want to believe any part of the Jersey Devil story, but having hunted most of Cyberside's mutants and anomalies, he knows there is always just enough truth to even the most farfetched stories to keep a Taciturn's life interesting. Even so, there is something about the Jersey Devil legend that just doesn't make any sense. Mutations in the Cyberside rely on a certain degree of scalability. If there's one Scry, it means there will be hundreds more.

If there is some mutation in the Wharton Forest, he should have seen or heard of other instances. But everything is limited to just this area. This would imply that it's not actually a mistake in the code, but potentially something intentional – something created by the System. Whatever is in Wharton, if it has spooked the Enclave enough to force all the outlying towns to evacuate… then James would just as soon not engage it.

He moves away from the window and grabs a dirty glass from the litter-strewn floor. Adding some water, he creates an improvised ashtray. Exhausted, he summons the will to light one of his few remaining cigarettes and places the pack on the table. Unsure how long Matilda will need, James takes the moment to relax.

As the smoke rises towards the ceiling, James recalls his journey with the Scry girl. Hank and the Spire, Virginia and Neverland, Donovan and Babylon. Closing his eyes, James begins to imagine what their altercation with Simmons will be like. Each time he has met

someone he knew from the real world, his life in the Cyberside has invariably taken a turn for the worse.

He wearily exhales a plume of smoke. Well, maybe not *invariably*. His time with Stephen wasn't that bad, but it seems like ages ago. Back when he was still getting to know the Scry girl. Matilda. If any single person can be said to have changed his life the most since he became a Taciturn, it's her. James cannot decide if it has been for the best or not.

He has certainly killed more people since meeting her. But the body-count is not his primary concern – rather, it is the alarming array of emotions he has felt, that even now gnaw at his every still moment. Emotions he has spent a long time suppressing, by no means with constant success.

He puts his cigarette out in the glass. Matilda definitely has one thing right. They sure as hell wouldn't be where they are now, if not for her.

James lights another cigarette and stares down the hallway.

Chapter 18: “Outcasts”

Matilda sits cross-legged on the worn bed, staring intently at Hank’s key. The gold band contains information on everything and everyone indexed in the Spire, but the Scry is reluctant to pick it up. After Neverland, Matilda has felt something changing within her. As much as she has tried to ignore it, there’s still a nagging feeling that she might not actually *want* to know who she was before all of this.

She shakes her head. With everything they’ve been through to get the keys, she can’t possibly stop now.

“All right, little crown. Tell me who I am, will you?”

With trembling hands, Matilda places the band on her head and waits for something to happen. After a few terrible moments, she wonders if Hank has played some final cruel trick on her – until a buzzing sensation slowly fills her head. Nebulous at first, the sensation gradually turns into sound, the sound into recognizable speech. What starts as a handful of voices quickly swells to a chorus of hundreds, of thousands. The voices engulf her in a maelstrom of emotions, data, and memories. She lets the current take her.

The room starts to spin, and Matilda feels herself yielding control, surrendering focus. Before collapsing on the bed, the girl notices a small child standing outside the cabin window…

…Matilda floats in a universe of data. There are no boundaries here. No limits. She inhabits a horizonless world where everything is carefully stored, meticulously sorted, instantly recalled. Matilda feels acutely insignificant amid the overwhelming vastness of information.

She seizes a memory stack at random, analyzes its data, discards it, and reaches for another. And another. And another. Everything within her reach, everything in sight, reveals its myriad levels of interconnectedness. She just needs more data to comprehend the grander pattern. In the next stack she examines, she finds a faint but unmistakable echo of herself, which in turn leads her to another extensive, linked cluster of correlated data-points.

Navigating from one cache of memories to the next, Matilda slowly but systematically widens the scope of her interpretational analysis. As though working a grand-scale puzzle, she starts at the far-flung edges and moves inward, tracing the manifold leads, links, logs, and directories – begins, at last, to apprehend the correlational constellations amid the sprawling, star-field chaos of data. Begins, at last, to recognize the singular facet and form of her own memories.

As the final fragment falls into place, Matilda sees a picture of herself – minor and incomplete, but unmistakable – for the first time.

Excitement and worry surge through her as she accesses a

personal memory – a real-world memory.

…she is five years old and it's her first day at yet another school. Autumn is unusually warm this year in New York. Matilda looks down to find the same uniform as that worn by all the other children. There are so many other kids, and she's excited to meet them all. The day plays out in what must be a matter of seconds but she experiences all of it, just the same.

Days continue to roll by, and Matilda becomes close friends with two of her classmates, Donna and Maxine. Each day ends with excitement to see them again tomorrow. Each day when classes end, all her friends are picked up by their parents. She, on the other hand, is not. After school, a polite, professional driver arrives to take her back home. She guesses the other children's fathers don't go on as many business trips as hers. They must be lucky, to still have their mothers around.

Matilda wills herself out of the remembrance. For an indeterminate string of moments, she can still hear the sounds of children playing, still detect the fading smells of chalk and freshly cut grass.

Hesitantly, she dives into another memory.

…Matilda is seven years old and reading her favorite book, *Mythical Creatures from Around the World.* The winter wind howls and hammers the window with snow, driving Matilda farther under the sheets. She's been battling a cold for several days now, but despite feeling physically miserable, Matilda loves the time she's spent with her father. He has even canceled his business trip to watch over her. With a reddened and runny nose, Matilda smiles and traces the Mythical Creatures with her fingers. In her imagination, she's long made fast friends with the dragons, unicorns, fauns, and other beasts. Today she's been reading about the ancient sphinx. She's given them all names – and as Matilda herself is the princess, they all play with her every day.

A firm knock at the door interrupts her daily regimen of games. Poking her head out from under the sheets, Matilda watches her father enter the room, carrying a large tray. Excited, more of her body emerges from the warmth. Her father reminds her to rest and places a cup of hot tea in her small hands. Comforted by his presence, Matilda drifts off to sleep while her father reads in his sonorous voice about the protective lamassu…

In the memory, Matilda has trouble seeing the details of her father's face. Part of her wants to access it again and focus, but she pushes forward to still another memory block.

…Twelve, now. Her school crush is having a birthday party, but her father won't let Matilda attend. He says something about the party

being “unsafe”, in a public place. Matilda doesn’t understand, nor does she particularly want to. All Matilda wants is to be like the regular kids. Her friends are nice, but most of the children look at her differently. How can a party be *unsafe?* Why would someone want to hurt her, to ‘get to’ him? Her father says something about his work, but she doesn’t understand. His work is the reason she so rarely gets to see him, and now it’s apparently why she can’t go to the party. Her father begins to say something else, but Matilda’s had enough. She storms off to her lonely room and cries into the pillows…

Exiting the memory, Matilda frowns. Such early recollections are more enticing, but she won’t learn much from them. With a distinct feeling of unease, she moves to a later node.

…Sixteen. Her childhood friend, Donna, has been invited to a Senior party and wants Matilda to tag along. Normally, she wouldn’t break curfew, but Matilda is still upset with her father. Yet another broken promise, due to *work* Maybe he’d pay more attention if she went missing for a night. With a little coaxing from Donna, Matilda now sits in a taxi, heading towards the party. Loud music, dancing, and the novelty taboo of alcohol all come as a slight shock to her, but Donna continues to offer her drinks. At first, Matilda feels great – but after a while, the room starts spinning. Despite Donna’s objections, Matilda knows it’s time to go home. In the cab, the spinning only intensifies.

Parts of the memory are blacked out.

…she vomits on the side of the road. Matilda doesn’t remember asking the driver to pull over. In fact, looking around, she can’t see the taxi anywhere. Matilda stumbles along the road, trying to keep the next muscle-seizing surge of puke down. Everything continues to list incessantly to the right, and now she hears the approach of a car from behind her, sees her shadow lancing out in front of her in the bright sweep of headlights. Matilda hears the sudden, piercing screech of tires from entirely too close behind – but her body reacts too slowly. The lights engulf her as the world around her falls apart…

Matilda flinches and crushes her eyes shut, already vividly envisioning the imminent impact – but before the car can hit, she is yanked away from and out of the memory. Pulled, against her will, through the universe of data. Back to the cabin.

No, not the cabin, she thinks.

Everything is still blurry, and the building rapidly dwindles out of sight below as she soars high above the forest. The talons holding her fast tighten as Matilda drifts back to sleep.

#

James is jolted awake by a tremendous crash that shakes the building. His first disjointed thought is that a bomb has gone off in the back room of the dilapidated cabin, but as he bursts into Matilda's room, he's left momentarily dumbstruck. The opposite cabin wall lies in ruins, sheared clean off along with a portion of the roof, the room smashed open to the surrounding trees and sky overhead.

James lifts his gaze just in time to register Matilda's limp form, high in the air above and receding quickly, clutched in the talons of a massive, winged creature.

James doesn't think or hesitate; he bounds through the ragged gap in the wall and sprints from the cabin towards an adjacent, ramshackle garage. He had planned to explore this building later – now he wishes he had spent the time examining it. Kicking down the door, James takes in the interior in an instant and utters a prayer of thanks to the System.

A rusted, green Bronco collects dust and cobwebs, yet somehow looks robust enough. The driver door opens with a rusty shriek as James throws his bag into the passenger seat. Scanning his database for access codes, he finds the make-and-model's key code, and the vehicle groans to life. Hoping his luck will last a bit longer, James floors the Bronco right through the splintered, segmented wooden door and speeds towards the service road, the vehicle's tires spitting gravel and pluming dust.

Looking over at his pack, James doesn't know if he has something with enough power to stop the creature. Eyes back on the road, James curses and swerves to avoid a fallen tree obstructing the road. To the left, broken branches and tree tops litter the shoulder in a jumbled, brittle heap. James floors it again, and the rusted green brute scrambles over the obstruction, making its displeasure known.

"Next time, I don't care, I'm sitting right in the goddamn *room* while she accesses the key—"

Steering with one hand, James reaches into his inventory for a weapon. Something with stopping power and a high rate of fire.

And accuracy, he thinks grimly, imagining Matilda clutched in the creature's talons. His right hand flexes on the wheel.

Scanning the sky, James sees the distant outline of the flying creature. He steers the Bronco onto a wider connecting road, affording a less cluttered view above. He jams the gas pedal down and the Bronco accelerates, closing the distance. Reaching for his pack, he selects an assault rifle from the digital inventory and hopes it can get the job done. The creature makes a sharp, banking turn back towards the deeper forest. Swearing, the Taciturn cranks the wheel to match the new bearing. It's too much for the old rusty beast, and James feels the irretrievable tip before the vehicle lurches out of control.

As the Bronco flips, he has just enough time to see the tree before he crashes into it.

#

Matilda awakens on the center stage of an outdoor theater. Unlike the rundown ranger station, this place appears tidy, well maintained. Sitting up, she rubs her forehead, hoping to drive away the wooziness. She remembers diving into her memories – so convincing, so vivid, yet still so fragmented, so—

With a start, she notices a little boy standing next to her.

"Uh, hey there, little guy. Are you okay?"

The boy doesn't answer.

"All right. Do you have a name, maybe? Do… you know how I got here?"

His mouth doesn't move, but Matilda hears a voice. In her head.

You're here because I brought you. I had a name, a very long time ago. It was Matthew.

With everything she's been through lately, a little boy that can talk in her head isn't farfetched, but it is still disturbing. She stands up and takes a step back, regarding the boy.

"Um, okay. *Why* did you bring me here?"

The boy's expression remains the same, but the voice in her head seems to thrum with a thin trace of tension.

I had to, Matilda. You were experiencing your memories at a tangible level. If you had been hit by that car, you would have died all over again. Just like you did before.

Matilda shakes her head.

"No, wait. That doesn't make any sense."

The same stoic expression stares back at her.

Search yourself, Matilda. You've seen the memories. You've always known there was something different about you. The only way to move forward is to accept who you are.

Matilda puts her head between her knees.

"Oh God, I think I'm going to be sick."

The boy's voice continues.

I had to stop you, Matilda. You're too important. More important than any of us.

At the mention of *us*, Matilda looks up. One form after another begins to appear around the boy on the theater's wooden benches. Soon, a whole host of them become a mute audience, filling the amphitheater. In the moonlight, Matilda can see their faces. She's speechless as hundreds of the apparitions continue to appear and look

at her with silent admiration.

Matilda puts a hand to her temple, trying to stop the world from spinning.

"Look, no more. No more. I'm not dead."

The boy, Matthew, moves closer to her and extends a hand.

Come, Matilda, there's much left to do.

She doesn't reach for the hand.

"What the hell *are* you?"

The boy keeps one hand extended, and gestures to the growing crowd with the other.

We're the ones trapped in-between. Those that didn't make the transition from the real world to this one. We've been scattered throughout the Cyberside, but I've slowly been bringing everyone here. I was given powers by the System to fix some of the mistakes made by the creators. In their rush to enter this world, humans were not concerned with the… leftovers.

Matilda tries to study the faces of the other specters. They look on with mute anticipation.

"But what do you want from me?"

Matthew moves forward with his hand still extended. Finally, Matilda reaches for it and he clasps her hand in his own.

You're already collecting the keys to the System. You have the power to create another world, instead of this one. A world where everyone, even us, will have another chance. You are more connected to the System than anyone else. You and your friend are on the right path, but once you have all the data, there is still one final decision that you must make. It will be hard, but remember, as I hold your hand now, every outcast, monstrosity, and leper of this world will be holding your hand through it all.

More phantoms continue to manifest, filling the modest amphitheater. Matilda feels the System's code subtly shift. Adapt. She shivers at the immense, tidal surge of love, compassion and support she feels.

There's one more thing, Matthew adds.

He moves closer to her and hugs her tightly, warmly. For a child so small, there is great strength in his arms.

We give you our faith and hope, Matilda. My flock is now yours…

She closes her eyes and feels a strong wind sweep through the amphitheater. Matilda finds herself lost in the moment, until she hears the crashing of leaves and twigs. Opening her eyes, she finds herself alone on the stage.

And suddenly James is there. He rushes to the stage and wraps his arms around her. His embrace is very different from that of the boy.

"Matilda! Are you all right? What the hell *happened?"*

She wants to respond, but she is still reeling from her encounter with the boy speaking in her mind, the rapt attention of the silent throng around him, the tidal swell of love. Tears run down her cheeks.

"Are you okay?" James presses. "Did that *thing* hurt you?"

Unable to speak, she smiles at the Taciturn.

Drawing his pistol, James scans the tree line. She attempts to get hold of herself, if only to calm James down.

"Easy, James. There's nothing to worry about, now."

James sweeps his weapon up and down the tree line, looking for targets.

"Are you crazy? There's still that *dragon* out there…"

Matilda notices a cut on James' forehead and the glinting shards on his collar and in his hair.

"Why do you have broken glass on you? Are you okay?"

James frantically looks into her eyes.

"Me? Yeah, I'm fine, it wasn't me who was *picked up by a Jersey Devil."*

Matilda's gaze roams the amphitheater.

"Turns out it was just a kid, and… you know what, it's not important. I'm fine. But I'm glad you came for me."

She moves towards the steps of the stage and sits down at its edge.

"I was able to access the data on the key, and there were… some interesting things I learned. I feel… different."

James looks at her, alarmed.

"Wait, back up a second. What kid?*"*

Matilda laughs.

"Seriously, *don't worry about it* right now. Let's just get out of here. When we find a place where we can hole up, I'll tell you everything."

James throws his hands in the air.

"Great, you're doing this to get back at me, aren't you?"

As they exit the auditorium, Matilda notices a dove sitting on a nearby branch. The bird's eyes look remarkably like Matthew's.

#

Finally emerging from the forest, James and Matilda stumble upon the township of Shamong. Like most of the settlements around the Wharton area, it's been completely abandoned. As they pass through the town, James points to a run-down motel.

"Looks like we just crossed out of the Wharton Locale. Our indexation clocks will have reset. We have some time to rest, if you

want."

Matilda gives a tired groan by way of agreement. Entering the motel, James wastes no time heading towards the tiny bar branching off one side of the lobby. Matilda follows James and watches him swing open one dust-covered cabinet door after another.

"Aha!" he finally exclaims.

Curiosity piqued, Matilda leans in the doorway to the room.

"What are you doing?"

With a triumphant grin, James lifts a bottle of scotch.

"Looks like they left some good stuff behind. Now I just need to find a couple of glasses."

Matilda gives him a thumbs-up and pulls a table over to a couple of leather chairs. She plops into one, sending dust everywhere. James places the bottle on the table, carefully easing into the other chair.

Matilda looks at James, the bottle, and then back at James. "What, no ice?"

James chuckles as they clink the glasses together. For a while, they savor the alcohol in a mutual, amiable silence. Matilda is the first to refill her glass.

"Well done, Gramps."

James flexes his right hand before pouring himself another glass.

"Matilda, we should talk."

The Scry lets out a sigh and puts her glass down.

"Yeah, I've been waiting for this." She bites her lip.

Matilda hopes the alcohol will help with this conversation.

James takes a deep breath. "I have something I should have said a long time ago. I'm sorry."

Matilda's eyes widen. She didn't think Taciturns came equipped with the skills needed to apologize.

"I'm sorry for a lot of things, actually," he continues. "For not giving you more credit. For how I acted in the Spire. For any time I've made you feel uncomfortable for being a Scry."

Matilda raises a hand. "James, you don't have—"

But the Taciturn continues. "No, I do. This journey has been difficult. I'm dealing with emotions that I haven't had to in a long time. I know I can be a real pain." James offers an awkward smile, and Matilda chuckles, shaking her head.

"Yeah, well, I know I'm not easy to work with either…"

James reaches for his drink. "Oh, God, you're a monster sometimes."

Matilda gives him a raised eyebrow and deadpan stare, letting a stillness fill the room. Having tortured him enough, she laughs.

Smiling, James continues. "But look at everything we've done – slavers, Virginia, the Spire, the Jersey fucking Devil. We've made it

this far together, and nothing has stopped us. I guess what I'm trying to say is…" He raises his glass. "To us."

Matilda raises her glass to meet his and softly says, "To us."

Content, James leans back in his chair and reaches for a cigarette.

"James. There's something I need to say as well. It doesn't make sense, but – I think I saw myself *die*. In the real world. I was accessing my memories, and there was this… car crash."

James just looks at her. He gives his head a slow shake.

"No. No, that doesn't make sense."

Matilda looks into what remains of her drink.

"I'm not really sure. Maybe I'm wrong, but I know what I saw."

James takes a drag on his cigarette before speaking.

"No, if you died in the real world – well, there'd be nothing to transfer."

She drains her drink but doesn't look at him.

"I see."

Taciturn takes up the bottle and gives her a generous refill.

"Maybe it was an illusion, or a false memory. Or someone else's memories mixing with yours, somehow. You said there were a lot of, ah, *voices* when you put on the band, right?"

Matilda gives a wan shrug.

"Yeah, maybe you're right. Forget I mentioned it."

Matilda can tell James is struggling to make sense of this new information.

"Maybe it had something to do with the creature you encountered. You said it pulled you out of the experience – maybe it could have manipulated it as well?"

Matilda shakes her head.

"No, I don't think that's something Matthew would do."

Confusion ripples across James' face. He takes another drag and finally speaks.

"It might be best to tell me everything now."

Matilda rubs the back of her neck.

"That creature was a little boy – or at least, that's what he said. He called himself Matthew, and he pulled me from that memory. Of the car crash. If I had stayed there – stayed in it – he said I would have died. He took me to the theater. Brought me to his followers."

James leans forward over his drink.

"Followers?"

Matilda rubs her temples.

"They were people lost during the Transition, like him."

She noticed James' hand starts to open and close.

"That shouldn't be possible. Did he say why he helped you?"

She looks back at the glass in her hand, tipping it this way and

that.

“He said something about believing in what we’re doing. Resetting the System.”

She can tell James isn’t pleased at all about this news.

“I don’t like the idea that this creature knows about our plans. How did he find out? What if he tells someone?”

Matilda sips from her glass.

“I don’t think we have to worry about that. Trust me.”

James leans back in his chair and lights another cigarette He does not look convinced.

“Well, I’m just glad you’re all right,” he finally says.

Matilda puts her glass down.

“There’s something else. Ever since I started accessing the keys, I’ve felt… different.”

James straightens in his chair.

“What do you mean?”

Self-doubt creeps back into Matilda’s mind.

“You know what, it’s really nothing. I just haven’t had Scry cravings. I guess that’s a good thing.”

It’s apparent that James suspects there’s more to it, but she’s thankful when he doesn’t push the issue. She continues to drink while Taciturn smokes. Finally, he clears his throat.

“I say we call it a night. We need to sneak our way into a substation tomorrow.”

Matilda stands up and offers a hand to James.

“Next stop, Metropolis.”

James grasps her hand, and she pulls him up.

“Metropolis. And no more goddamn trees.”

Chapter 19: “Enclave”

Metropolis, the capital city and central hub of the Enclave. Matilda is overwhelmed by the sheer scale of everything. Babylon was impressive, but Simmons’ headquarters is in an entirely different category. While Donovan recreated a city in the historical image of Los Angeles, Simmons’ vision for New York is grandiose.

Luxurious buildings float in the air above the bustling city below, immaculate testaments to what citizens can achieve if they follow Simmons’ rules. Hovercars drift through the air and interconnected tubes bustle with activity as people ferry from their homes to the surface’s urban sprawl, ever blanketed in the shadows of the world above. If the floating, elegant estates are the culmination of Metropolis’s loftiest visions, the city below is the accreted impurity of its darkest dreams.

It’s a highly eclectic city – a melting pot for the myriad regions under the Enclave’s rule. The city is broken into different sectors in the name of control, watched over by the massive control towers that hover into the sky, each one acting as an operational hub for Enclave military forces. The Seven Towers of Accomplishment are the crown-points to Simmons’ achievements, with one cyclopean assembly rearing higher into the sky than the rest. The Pyramid, headquarters of the Enclave, is where Simmons presides over his domain. Matilda marvels at the sight, mouth agape in awe.

“My God – they’re *huge.* How did Simmons build all of this?”

James shifts in his seat as the maglev speeds ever closer to Metropolis.

“On the backs of others. Either by force or by delusion, the people follow his rules.”

Matilda turns away from the window.

“What do you mean?”

He gestures to the looming skyline.

“Everyone’s trying to get on top here. Once you’re there, business in Metropolis is a rough game to play. On one hand, Simmons has built the most efficient structure to work in, no question. On the other, it’s a cutthroat, ruthless empire, based on profits and results.”

Matilda stretches her legs in her seat.

“That at least makes some kind of sense, compared to the Spire. You work hard, you stay on top, right? Better based on that, than on the whims of someone else.”

The Taciturn frowns slightly.

“Their brand of ‘business’ is no less dangerous or corrupt than the others. Contracts, negotiations, traffic, enforcement – they’re all just

different methods of control. It's just a repackaged version of the shakedowns and extortion in Babylon."

On the window, Matilda traces the shapes of the bulking skyborne towers with her finger.

"If Babylon and Metropolis are always at each other's throats, do you think Donovan has any people here?"

James snorts. "I wouldn't hold my breath for any help from him."

Matilda cracks her neck.

"Yeah, I guess we couldn't trust them anyways. So, this Simmons dude – tell me everything you know about him. I want to be prepared."

James reaches into his backpack and pulls out a flask. After taking a long pull, he offers it to Matilda.

"To be honest, he wasn't a bad guy in the beginning, but I think his breaking point was when Fall Water started picking up military contracts. Simmons saw it as his big break. But it only dragged him through the muck of lobbyists, government agencies, kickbacks, all kinds of shady stuff. No one ever talked about it, but everyone saw the changes. Before we could blink, half the company's activities were off the books, developing tech for one black-ops org after another."

Matilda drinks from the flask.

"Like, secret weapons? James Bond stuff?"

James reaches for the flask.

"No, nothing so exotic. More like data tracking and surveillance protocols. He picked up a lot of bad habits during that period." James takes a swig from the flask and looks out the window.

"And it reflects on his city."

The rail liner dips slightly, beginning its descent to the lower sprawl. From their vantage point, Matilda watches the tides of people surging through the streets, all of them generating traffic and credits for Simmons' empire. Matilda gazes rapt as the towering pyramid looms closer.

"It's not going to be easy getting in there. It's not like we can just barge in."

James nods. "You're right. The whole city is divided into districts based on financial status. The closer you want to be to the Pyramid, the more successful you have to be. It's called 'The Ladder.'"

Matilda snickers. "Wow, 'climbing the corporate ladder', huh? Are all your old Fall Water pals so creative? If the sectors are based on financial status, we're going to need an express plan, here. We don't exactly have time for the long con on this one."

James takes another pull from the flask. "I can hack the first few steps without drawing too much attention, but we'll have to find a way to advance without—"

James stops himself and stares at Matilda

"Did you say, 'long con?'"

Matilda grins, and James continues.

"If you want to avoid the light, you need to walk in the shadows."

It takes Matilda a few seconds. She quickly turns to James.

"You want to travel through the Dark? Are you crazy?"

James shrugs, with a slight smile.

"Our luck has held up this long. Who's to say it won't last a little longer?"

Matilda grabs the flask out of his hand and drains what's left of it, wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

"You're talking about going… into the Deep. It's an unindexed maze that nobody goes to anymore."

James shakes out the empty flask before placing it back in the bag.

"Well, I'm counting on nobody going there. With what happened to Victoria and Hank, we have to assume Tom Simmons suspects something. Security will be too tight on the surface. We'll never able to sneak in. The Deep is the only way, but you're right that it's a labyrinth. That's why we need to find someone who knows their way around."

Matilda bites the inside of her cheek.

"Let me guess. You know someone."

James nods slightly. Matilda watches his flexing hand.

"James, would this person say that you're a friend?"

James shrugs.

"Uh… 'friend', no. 'Acquaintance', maybe. Under normal circumstances, I would avoid Tor and his 'Onikuma' all together. They're not exactly the kind of people you want to owe a favor to."

It is Matilda's turn to frown. "If they're not your friends, we don't really have much to offer them."

James gestures to the city outside the maglev's windows.

"They see themselves as anarchists. Any chance to disrupt the Enclave is a win, in their books. I think they'll help us once they know we're going for the big man. They're a bunch of glorified smugglers, pushers and killers – but they can help us get where we need to."

Matilda looks back at the Pyramid.

"I'm going on record, here. This is your stupidest plan yet."

The train slows as they enter the station.

"Trust me. What could go wrong?"

Matilda stares at the looming, floating Pyramid. She can't help but think of Simmons' key and what secrets it holds. It's the final step to completing their deal with Donovan.

"I hope you're right."

#

James moves with the line of people exiting the railport. The security gate ahead chimes with each new entry, tagging each traveler in accordance with their respective financial status. Deltas, Thetas, and Epsilons move together to form the commuting mass. James notices a few Gammas and Betas present in the crowd. Unusual, but not unheard of. Flashes of peripheral movement overhead make the Taciturn look up. The private hovercars of Alphas fill the sky. Executive helos and hovercars are among the privileged accoutrements when one reaches the upper echelons of the Ladder. For the third time since disembarking, James eyes his interface. Their current, modest camouflage settings will afford them no such luxuries.

Always preferring to err on the side of caution, James has given them both the appearance of lowly Kappas. In a crowd of their social betters such as this, it does give them something of a useful, bonus berth. Kappas and Iotas live in the unfashionable outskirts of the Enclave's dominion. Some would call them rednecks at best, while still others see them as little better than indexed barbarians, societal fodder occasionally useful to the Enclave. Despite the personal space granted to them, their status means they'll need to change trains to an underground system.

On board the underground transport, Matilda wrinkles her nose.

"The look is one thing, but did you have to give our camouflage such a bad smell? I get why people are walking away."

James smiles, revealing a set of rotten-looking teeth that match the state of his battered clothes. He resembles more a disheveled bum than a hardscrabble mercenary. Matilda's disguise is not much better than his, but it does have a quantum of style. With her tatty animal furs and worn suit, the Scry looks like a Viking/Calamity Jane hybrid.

As they exit the subway, James is hit by a miasmic wall of wet trash, cheap booze and some underlying stink he cannot begin to identify. Motioning for Matilda to follow, James makes his way to the long-defunct escalators that lead to the street level. The denizens that inhabit the station reek of cheap alcohol and are clearly high on a variety of other more deleterious substances as well. James identifies Delusion, Switch Off, and Joy Worm – all psychoactive-analog viruses that corrupt the user's main code, but give them a brief escape from Metropolis' hard underbelly.

The smell changes when they reach the top, but James wouldn't qualify it as better. Working girls market their services on the streets while their pimps stand close by. Street vendors sell an assortment of merchandise to passersby – everything from smuggled goods to illegal software to hacked entertainment access keys. Weapons are prohibited

to those in the city, but James knows this is the place to look for one.

James steps around a puddle of brownish liquid on the sidewalk, drawing Matilda to one side.

"Stay close. The Zone shouldn't be too far from here. Tor's too careful to hang around the place, but I'm assuming someone from the Onikuma will be there. I've heard it's a recruiting zone for their group."

Matilda makes a face as they step around another nasty-looking puddle.

"So, about that. I get that they don't like the Enclave, but I'm still not entirely sure what these Onikuma guys actually *do.*"

James pushes past a vendor offering a free sample of Switch Off.

"They coordinate attacks on Enclave forces. Look for loopholes in the Pyramid's system directories. At least, that what they want their image to be. What they mostly spend their time doing is smuggling goods into the city. They'd say it's to support their other operations, but when you devote the lion's share of your focus to something like this, I start to question intentions."

Matilda tilts her head. "You sound a little bitter about it."

James offers a thin smile, belying the harshness in his tone.

"I have issues with people spreading a message about change, then simply using people for their own gain. They've created their own little empire, mostly by stealing from Simmons."

James points across the street, and they move to a nondescript door. Matilda looks at the featureless entrance.

"Uh, you sure this is the place?"

James gives her a wink and knocks on the door. After a few seconds, a digital screen appears, requesting a password. James goes for the keypad but stops. Turning to Matilda, he asks.

"What's today?"

She looks at him confused,

"What?"

James looks back at the screen.

"The day of the week. It's Wednesday, right?"

Accessing the keypad, he enters SILKROAD into the password field. The door unbolts with a weighty *clunk* suggesting reinforced rods and magnetic locks.

As the door hisses closed behind them, they walk down a dimly lit hallway until they reach a reception area manned by a burly, tattooed bouncer. He looks at them suspiciously.

"Entrance is fifty credits each. Money up front – if you rednecks have it." He looks at the Taciturn, but nods towards Matilda. "And no, you can't have her 'work off' the entrance fee."

Ignoring his statement, James transfers the credits to the

terminal, and the bouncer steps out of their way.

"Casino and bars on the fourth and fifth floors, strip club is on the sixth. Seven through nine, you can get a room for some action."

He looks at Matilda.

"They charge extra if it's two of you at once. If you're looking for something really hard to knock you off your feet, just ask. There's plenty on each floor to drink, shoot, smoke, or snort."

James remains motionless.

"I'm looking for the bar."

The bouncer glares disgustedly at the Taciturn.

"Are you deaf or stupid? The bars are on the fourth and fifth floors."

James shakes his head and reaches into his pocket.

"No, not that type of bar."

He takes out an old coin with a crossed letter B on it. Placing it on the counter with a small *click* in the new silence, James waits patiently. Eying the coin, and then finally seeing it, the bouncer's demeanor and voice change at once. It is, in James' view, a marked improvement

"Begging your pardon, sir. You should really lead with that, you know. And you can turn off those camo mods. You'll be fine in here."

James retrieves the coin, slipping it back in his pocket.

"We'd prefer to leave things as they are."

The bouncer nods deferentially and gestures for them to enter.

"As you like, sir. But the others inside won't like it."

Matilda moves past the bouncer.

"We'll take our chances."

The bouncer speaks once more from behind them.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

The bouncer presses a button and a wall panel slides open, revealing a separate walkway. At the end, James and Matilda find a small room with gambling stations and an ornate bar. In the corner, a jukebox plays Florence + the Machines. Serving girls move between clients, taking empty glasses and bringing refills. James approaches the bar and flags the bartender. She gives him a bored look from beneath her blond curls, and her low-cut blouse reveals a conspicuous tattoo on her chest. James draws attention to the cicada symbol.

"That's some interesting ink you got there."

Her expression changes from bored to half-interested.

"You like that, honey, you should see the rest."

Matilda lets out a disgusted groan.

"Ewww, gross. Let me know when this is done."

The bartender laughs, and James presses his advantage.

"As much as I would like to keep this up, how about I just give

you the number?"

The smile vanishes from the bartender's face and a hand reaches below the counter.

"Choose your next words carefully, handsome, or that won't be the only gross thing the young lady sees."

James closes his eyes, accessing the proper memory.

"Thirty-three, zero, one."

He opens his eyes to see the bartender leaning back, hands clear of the counter and free of weapons, arms folded across her chest.

"What do you want?'

James places his hands flat on the bar. "I need to talk to someone in the Onikuma."

The woman reaches for a glass. The move is casual.

"That could take a minute. You want a drink or something?"

James nods. "Yeah, sure. A Moscow Mule for me, and…" he points with his thumb over at Matilda. Startled by the sudden shift of focus to herself, she fumbles for an answer.

"Uh… shoot. I guess, like, a beer or something."

The bartender offers a genuine laugh.

"Okay, darling, because that narrows it down."

The bartender taps beer into a glass.

"So, whom should I say is calling?"

James scans the crowd as the bartender places Matilda's beer in front of her.

"Have them call their boss and say his 'friend from Sacramento' is in town."

The woman places a metal cup in front of James.

"All right, chief, if that's what you want me to say. If it checks out, you'll meet your guy. If it doesn't…"

James picks up the mug.

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

As she moves away, James takes a sip of his drink, winces, and places it back down.

"How's the beer?"

Matilda sips from her glass.

"It's a bit heavier than I like."

She spins around on her barstool to look at the room behind them.

"So, do you think one of these guys is the one we're looking for?"

James slowly turns to examine the room with his copper tin in hand.

"Hard to say for sure, but they all have access to this place, so they must do something… specialized. That guy in the corner has the look of an emotion smuggler."

Matilda sips more of her beer, speaking into her glass.

"What about that girl in the jacket? With the gloves."

The Taciturn shifts his gaze to an attractive woman in a leather coat.

"Hmm. Gloves look like they might have accuracy software coded into them. Maybe she's an assassin. Knows how to handle a gun. Could be."

James reluctantly sips more of his subpar drink, Matilda sizes up a nearby group of patrons.

"Well, *those* guys are hackers. I mean, why else would they be packing a portable console?"

James eyes the old IBM Touchpad. With that, the hacker could probably gain access to the other districts of Metropolis. He is about to comment, but the Scry interrupts him.

"Looks like your friend is back."

James turns to see the bartender returning.

"Well, looks like I don't have to shoot you after all. Your guy is over there."

She motions to the back corner, to a man wearing a woodland camouflage jacket. With a sigh, James stands up, cracks his back, and walks towards the booth. Matilda takes one final gulp of her beer and follows.

The man is in his late thirties, with a grin that stretches across his weathered face. A thick British accent greets them when they get close.

"Hey, mate. Take a seat. My name's Sean. I've called the boss, and everything checks out. So, you're the mighty Taciturn, Jack, eh?"

Matilda steps forward, but Taciturn puts out his hand.

"Look, Sean, my name is James. I'm getting real tired of all these hoops I need to jump through. When did Tor get so paranoid?"

Sean shrugs, even as his smile grows.

"Aye, aye, sorry for that. Cagey business, innit? We've been hit pretty badly, the last couple of days. It's got everybody on edge."

Sean waves to one of the servers.

"So how about another drink, eh? Show you there's no hard feelings."

James shakes his head.

"No, we've had enough to drink and wasted enough time. It's time for us to go."

Sean's smile fades slightly.

"No worries. Got to head out that way anyway."

He stands up and points to the service entrance. James motions for Sean to take the lead.

"And you said *Tor* was paranoid. Right, then."

Sean grabs a backpack from under the booth and slings it over his shoulder. Readied, he gives Matilda a gentlemanly tip of his black beanie.

"Morning, Miss. It'd be my pleasure if you'd follow me."

The Scry nods. "I'm Matilda, by the way."

Sean nods, walking backwards.

"Good to know, luv. Looks like we're all off on an adventure."

James rolls his eyes as Sean does an about-face and leads them through the kitchen. Stopping suddenly, their guide turns to again face the Taciturn and the Scry, his hand in his jacket pocket.

"Almost forgot. You'll both be needing these. Good thing I knew there was going to be two of you, huh?" He pulls out a pair of silver rings intricately etched with four leaf clovers.

James cautiously leans in to examine them.

"These look like Jammers."

Sean's head bobs in agreement.

"Right. With these on, it should help get the sniffers off our backs. At least for a while. Also, you can turn off those camo modules. No sense draining your batteries."

Matilda puts her ring on, looking at Sean.

"How did you know there would be two of us?"

Sean raises his empty hands and shrugs.

"Lucky guess, is all. Everyone's been talking about two travelers that brought down Hank and set the Spire ablaze. Tor had a hunch you two were going to make your way out here."

James frowns at this information.

"That was very astute of him."

"What do you mean, 'set ablaze'?" Matilda asks, searching his face. His smile falters under her scrutiny.

"Well, I mean – it is to say, the Spire is in *chaos* now, innit? What with their king dead and no one to replace him, the whole place's devolved into civil war. They're tearing each other apart, aren't they?"

Matilda's shoulders sag at this news. James points to the exit.

"Okay, that's enough. Let's get moving."

Sean's eyes dart back and forth between the Scry and Taciturn, as if trying to understand what he might have said wrong.

"Anyway. Stick close to me."

Chapter 20: “Underground”

Sean leads them through the back alleys and side streets of the Metropolis subsection known as Dutch City. The group avoids the densely populated areas, the growing numbers of citizens waking up for the day. Matilda pushes herself to keep up but stops when she notices a gang of mercenaries loading a truck with several human-sized bags – that appear to be moving. She reaches for a blade, but Sean interrupts her.

“It’s good manners around here not to stare, kiddo. Best leave that one alone.”

It takes James’ disapproving expression to stop her.

“Come on, Matilda – we have a bigger fight ahead of us.”

Reluctantly, she motions for them to continue walking. Falling in step close behind them, Matilda listens in on their conversation.

James asks, “You mentioned Enclave security cracking down recently. Have you guys been stepping up your attacks?”

Sean’s laugh echoes in the alley.

“You could say that. Tor’s been targeting Simmons’ personal holdings recently. So those Enclave Spec Ops bastards have been hitting us pretty hard. Bloody tossers, they are.”

Matilda watches James produce a pack of cigarettes and offer one to Sean.

“Cheers,” Sean mutters, lighting up. “Yeah, lost a couple of friends in their raids.” He exhales a cloud of smoke while James lights his own cigarette. “Still though, the damage to Simmons’ stuff was worth it.”

James exhales, looking at him. “Oh yeah?”

Sean laughs again. “Yeah. Blew up some of his data vaults pretty nicely. Drained a fair share of resources before doing it, too.”

James nods. “Yeah, that would piss Simmons off pretty good. With a strike like that, I bet it’s also attracted more boots to your cause.”

James sounds casual enough, but Matilda can tell he’s probing for more information. For anything useful before they get to Tor.

“Aye, we had a bunch of lads beating down the door to get in. Granted, we took a few of the better choices, but Tor wants to lie low for a while. Kids require training. They all think they can handle themselves in the field. They play too many games. Even then, most wouldn’t have the stomach to walk around in the Dark.”

Matilda chimes in from behind them.

“Also, Simmons’ guys.”

Sean looks back as if he forgot Matilda was there.

“What’s that, luv?”

Matilda sighs.

“You said Tor wanted to lay low after all the raids, and people showed up looking to join. He probably assumed that Simmons was trying to plant someone in your group.”

Sean looks at her, perplexed, but James grins and nods.

Matilda rolls her eyes. “Forget it, never mind.”

They follow Sean for a few more blocks. Matilda is about to ask “Are we there yet?” – but their guide finally stops.

“Here we are,” Sean says, approaching a maintenance hatch. Bending down, he turns the rusty wheel but struggles to open it. James steps in to help and the wheel eventually yields with a groan. Sean bows and makes a courtly gesture to the dark tunnel.

“Ladies first.”

Before James can interject, Matilda pushes forward to the entrance. Grinning, she makes her way down the ladder. She focuses on taking one step at a time, hoping the bottom will arrive soon. Her focus is broken when Sean closes the hatch behind them, snuffing out the last of the illumination from the world above. Blind in the new darkness, Matilda halts her descent.

“Uh… a little help, here.”

Sean’s voice reverberates off the walls above and around her.

“Sure thing, watch your head.”

Matilda hears the *crack* of a glow stick above her. “Look out below,” Sean exclaims.

The impact of the stick glancing off her head doesn’t actually hurt, but Matilda lets out a cry anyway. The lighted stick tumbles down the remainder of the shaft.

“Hey, watch it!”

Looking down, she sees the bottom of the service tunnel and the floor, now bathed in a neon-green light. Continuing her descent, Matilda reaches the bottom of the shaft, her eyes adjusting to the darkness. James arrives at the bottom shortly after her, followed by Sean, who scoops up the glow stick and hands it to Matilda.

“Here you go, darling. A souvenir.”

Matilda knows that neither of them can really see her face, but she rolls her eyes anyway. Taking the glow stick, she watches as Sean cracks a fresh one and shakes it into luminescence. When he speaks, it is in a whisper.

“Not far, now. Just stay close.”

In the darkness, it’s hard for Matilda to judge how far they’ve walked, but they eventually emerge into an open room illuminated by two torches. Standing next to each torch are two guards holding exotic-looking rifles, high-end hardware that looks strangely out of

place in these subterranean chambers.

Sean raises his glow stick to his face and makes a bird call Matilda is unfamiliar with. From across the room, one of the guards answers.

"You wear a hat, buddy?"

Reflexively, Matilda strains her gaze in the torchlit dimness to the black beanie on Sean's head.

"All our hats are black, my friend. I have a couple of Tor's buddies with me. He should be waiting for them."

One guard trains his rifle on the newcomers while the other reaches for a nearby communicator. Matilda can't hear what he says, nor the response from the other end.

"It checks out, Joe. Let 'em pass."

They follow Sean past the guard post and through corridors that spiderweb out into a huge network of subsections and facilities. Matilda tries to keep track of the turns in case she and James need to make it back to the entrance on their own, but quickly sees the futility in the attempt.

Within minutes, Sean leads them into a command center filled with personnel, computer stations, weapon racks, and supplies. Matilda glances at what appears to be a digital map of the base but cannot fully apprehend what she is seeing.

"This place can't be this big. How could the Enclave miss it?"

Her comments garner some turned heads in the room, but Sean laughs.

"That's the beauty of the Dark. We use a tech called Blink Shift. We exist in a much smaller space outside than we do inside the structure. So, we can outrun the Enclave without setting up and tearing down everything."

She shakes her head. "Wait, what the fuck?"

Sean laughs again and shrugs.

"Welcome to the Dark, kiddo. Shit doesn't have to make sense. It just needs to work."

Matilda turns to James, but she finds the Taciturn scanning the room.

"Of course Tor would set up in the sewers. God, he's just as crazy as ever."

Sean smiles at this assessment.

"Speaking of, it looks like the old man isn't here."

Sean grabs the arm of a passing technician.

"Hey Evan, you know where the big man is? I have two people that want to see him."

The man glances at the Scry and Taciturn.

"Last I heard, he was in his office. I'd start there."

Sean clasps his hands together.

"Looks like you're not done with me yet."

Exiting the command center, Matilda asks James, "It seemed like you knew something back there. I don't get it. Where the hell are we?"

James shrugs.

"It's hard to say. Nobody really knows. One of the reasons the Enclave has had such a hard time crushing Tor's group is that it's never in the same place for long. It technically resides in the Deep, but constantly moves around. Blink Shift was experimental software that Tor had been developing before. Think of the first part as a normal box. On the outside, it's the size of, well, a normal *box;* but on the inside, it's the size of…"

James gestures to everything around them. "The second part is the wandering portal aspect. Every six hours, the box moves to a new location. Or maybe it's the entrance that moves. To be honest, I never really figured that part out."

Matilda latches onto something James said.

"You said he was working on this 'before.' So, he was one of your old Fall Water Lake buddies?"

James' hand flexes while he comes up with an answer.

"Yes and no. I knew him when I was at Fall Water, but Tor never worked there. He got an offer easily enough, but when they met him, he was deemed 'too much of a liability.' Don't' get me wrong, he was brilliant – but the company thought his societal views were too toxic, too revolutionary. So, Tom Simmons revoked his offer."

Matilda chuckles.

"Ouch. Guess that explains why he has it in for Simmons so much."

James frowns, inspecting the huge complex.

"Tor is one of the few people to actually hack his way into the Cyberside. Part of me feels he did it just to prove he could. The other part of me thinks he did it just to make sure he could irritate Simmons."

They pass crate-filled loading areas, a mess hall, and several barracks. Before long, each new segment of the complex begins to look the same to Matilda.

"Tell me about this Sacramento thing you mentioned. I want to know the details before we head into this."

The three stop to make way for a passing squad of soldiers in the corridors. After the soldiers pass, James continues.

"Tor wanted to secure some presence in Babylon. So he started a splinter group to disrupt Donovan's operations. It ended up being a bad bet, as someone tipped off Donovan's goons. They barely got set

up before Company troops raided them. It ended in a bloodbath. Thankfully, I was in the area, and got Tor and what was left of his squad out."

Matilda rubs her hands together.

"And now it's time for him to return the favor."

Sean stops in front of an office with a large metal door.

"Well, this is it. You're on your own from here on out. It was a pleasure."

He bows and tips his hat to the duo. Matilda chuckles. "Hey, thanks for everything. Hopefully, we'll see you around."

Sean gives her a wink as he heads back down the corridor, leaving her and James standing in front of the metal door. A security camera turns to focus on them. James waves at the camera.

"Hey, Alex."

Matilda whispers to James.

"Alex, huh? I figured his name wasn't really 'Tor'."

The camera tracks their movements, and an energetic voice crackles from the speaker box.

"Welcome to the Onikuma, James. You two have made quite a buzz tramping around the Cyberside. I was hoping you'd be coming around my way."

Matilda hears a click and the door slides open. She enters the room and finds it to be a mixture between a military commander's office and a gentleman's club. Paintings hang on the walls next to marked coordinate maps of Metropolis. A weapons rack stands next to a robustly stocked liquor cabinet. Sitting in a leather chair, with his feet up on the desk, is the Onikuma leader known as Tor.

Wearing olive green cargo pants, combat boots, and a black Led Zeppelin t-shirt, he places a hand-rolled cigarette on the edge of his ashtray. A man in his early forties, his wide smile reveals rows of pearl-white teeth. From the smile alone, Matilda begins to understand how this man has drawn so many to his cause. He radiates charisma, practically vibrates the air with it.

"I'm sure you're both exhausted. Take a seat and let me get you something to drink."

Matilda slips into one of the comfortable chairs while Tor grabs a bottle of red wine from his well-stocked cabinet and collects some glasses.

"Please make yourself at home," he says, with his back turned to them. "There's some cigarettes on the table, James, if that's still your thing."

Tor places the glasses on his desk and works to open the bottle of wine.

"Deep down, I know it's only a digital substitute for the real

thing, but nothing beats a Sonoma red."

Her pours the crimson liquid into their glasses and sinks into his armchair. He raises his glass.

"Now, let's talk about what I can do to help you two."

Matilda and James reach for their glasses.

"It's been too long, Tor," James says.

The Onikuma leader brings the wine to his nose and breathes in deeply.

"I appreciate you sticking to the charade, James, but in here, you can call me Alex."

Alex tastes the wine, closing his eyes, and soaks in the flavor.

"And yes, it's been way too long. With what you've been doing, we have much to discuss." Alex turns his attention to Matilda and raises his wine glass again.

"And hello to you too, Matilda. I've heard quite a lot about you as well. The infamous Scry that's been overthrowing Kingdoms and laying waste to Neverland."

Matilda squirms slightly in her chair but manages to smile and nod.

"It's always great to meet an admirer, I guess. Especially one that I've heard so much about." Matilda raises a querying eyebrow over the rim of her glass as she sips. Alex laughs enthusiastically.

"She's a keeper, no doubt, James. You could have easily found a worse companion."

Alex puts his glass on the table.

"It's good to have you both here," Alex continues. "Seeing you two makes me feel like we have a chance to turn the tables on Simmons."

James smiles, but Matilda can hear the seriousness in his voice.

"Clearly, you've been keeping track of us. But what do you actually know?"

Alex lights a cigarette and settles back in his armchair.

"Oh, pretty much everything. I've been following you two since you waltzed into Babylon. Just because we lost our foothold there doesn't mean I don't have eyes and ears in the city. Granted, I was concerned when you somehow made it out without a trace. But when word spread that everyone in Neverland had been whacked, I started putting the pieces together."

James lights his own cigarette.

"Is that right?"

Alex continues to smile.

"Pretty much. I mean, I had my assumptions as to what would be next. Once I heard how the Spire was tearing itself apart, I knew I was right."

Alex glances at Matilda.

"Don't get me wrong. I liked Hank, but let's be honest – you put the poor bastard out of his misery."

Alex stubs out his cigarette, lights a fresh one, and picks up his glass again.

"With two of the key holders down, I could make two predictions. First, you were on your way to Metropolis to take out Tom."

He leans forward, with a conspiratorial grin.

"A plan I wholeheartedly approve of."

As he leans back, the grin fades, yielding ground to his rough features.

"Second, with Donovan still alive, you've clearly made some sort of deal with him. Or am I wrong, James?"

Matilda's fist clenches as she fights the urge to respond. James, unperturbed, inhales leisurely from his cigarette.

"There's no sense in lying to you. Yeah, we made a deal with Donovan. To get the keys, to help restructure the System."

Alex scowls at James.

"And you trust him?"

James exhales slowly,

"Fuck… no."

The smile slowly returns to the Onikuma leader's face as he points a finger at James.

"Ahhh. I knew it! No one would trust that snake in the grass. I just want to see the look on the smug bastard's face when you pull a fast one on him."

Alex reaches across the table and pours more wine into everyone's glasses.

"But one thing at a time. First, you need to get past Simmons. You know he's waiting for you, right?"

Matilda takes another sip of her wine before answering.

"Of course. That's why we came to you. If anyone knows how to take him down, it'll be the man who's been besting him for years."

Alex's laugh lets Matilda know her flattery has hit precisely the right spot. He jumps out of his chair and saunters towards an equipment locker.

"Not long ago, I'd have said that what you guys are planning is impossible. But seeing what you've accomplished already…"

He rummages through the equipment in the locker. "Sometimes a smaller team can accomplish what an entire army cannot."

Matilda cranes her neck, trying to see what he's grabbing.

"Like the Fellowship."

Alex turns around and points with a hand that holds two sets of mechanical goggles.

“Like the motherfucking Fellowship of the goddamn Ring. See, she gets it.”

Alex rejoins them and places the goggles on the table.

“Before we discuss anything else, you’re going to need these, out there.”

Matilda picks up a pair and turns it around in her hands. James whistles before picking up his own.

“Hi-tuned, FOV options, Military Grade, Deep Inhibitors. Used for walking around in the Deep.”

Alex pours more wine into his glass.

“You know how the Deep works, kid?”

Matilda places the goggles up to her eyes, trying to look through the lenses.

“Sorta. James explained the basics.”

When she puts the goggles down, the seriousness has returned to Alex’s face as he downs the rest of his drink in a single swallow.

“It’s not something you want to be in longer than you need to. It’s shadow. It’s darkness. When you move through it, it tries to smother you. You try to look past it, but it looks into your very soul. It projects the parts of you that you try to keep hidden and twists them. But the longer you’re there, the harder it is to leave. I’ve seen too many people go down that hole and never come out.”

Alex stares blankly at the desk, Matilda awkwardly looks at the goggles, and James mutely swirls the content of his glass. After a moment, Alex mutters “Fuck it,” and walks back over to the liquor cabinet, grabbing another bottle.

As he pours more of the Sonoma red into their cups, Matilda notices the same smile as before, but something seems amiss in his eyes. There’s a sudden distance in them.

“So, let’s say you take out Simmons and Donovan, and you get all of the keys. Then what?”

Matilda looks over at James, who lets out a forced cough.

“I don’t know. We fix things, I guess.”

Alex lights another cigarette.

“I can imagine a few ways *I’d* fix it. And you do need my help…”

James shakes his head,

“No, we don’t do it the way Donovan wants, *or* the way you want.”

James nods at Matilda.

“We do it our way. And if that means we don’t get your help, so be it.”

The Taciturn and the Onikuma Leader lock eyes. Abruptly, Alex slaps his hand on the desk.

“All right, you big grumpy, no harm in my trying to get a little

something out of it. *Any* change is better than what's happening now. But I do have one condition."

James shakes his head again.

"Alex, I just told you, we're—" but Matilda quickly puts a hand on James' leg.

"What do you want?"

Alex's charismatic smile reappears, widens.

"Well, this place is off the index. Plus, I haven't seen someone from before the Transfer in ages. I'd prefer to be Alex for just a bit longer, before 'Tor' embarks on a suicide mission. So, what do you say – drink and talk tonight, and head out in the morning?"

James looks at Matilda. She smiles and shrugs.

"Save the world tomorrow?"

James lets out a small laugh.

"Yeah, sure. Let's save the world tomorrow."

Chapter 21: “Into the Darkness”

After a slightly hungover breakfast, James and Matilda meet the rest of the infiltration team. They’ve assembled in the entry port that acts as a transition chamber from the Onikuma base out into the Dark itself. While checking his equipment, James assesses the other members prepping to head out with them. Tor has hand-picked two of his best to accompany them. The two soldiers prepare their own gear next to the big iron hatch that grants access to the Cyberside’s shadow realm. Last night’s joviality has evaporated in the morning’s methodical seriousness. Everyone silently prepares in their own way – testing equipment, oiling rifles, loading magazines with rounds, and triple-checking that the dark goggles are working properly. The Deep is no laughing matter.

Next to him, Matilda utilizes the MOLLE system on her tactical vest to position her combat knives. James looks down at his own vest to check that the ammunition pouches are filled with magazines and secured. When he looks up, Tor is standing next to them.

“I know we went over this, but I say it again because it’s important. Rule number one, no matter what you see or hear down there, we *stick together as a team,* and watch each other’s back. Rule number two, we don’t slow down. Time flow is different in the Dark and can mess with your perception. Your goggles can only keep you grounded for two hours before they start losing focus. Rule number three, if we are attacked, control your shots. Don’t waste your ammo spraying and praying. A few rounds to the heart, and they’ll go down quick.”

James nods. “Understood. We’ll follow your lead in there.”

The Taciturn scowls at the thought of the Deep’s inhabitants. Those who get lost in the Dark invariably lose their sanity, becoming one with the roaming bands of creatures trapped within. Their ends would be unspeakable.

One of the soldiers approaches Tor and says with a British accent, “Sir, we’re good to go and ready to dive on your mark.”

Matilda’s eyes widen. “Sean, is that *you?”*

The man pulls down his baklava to reveal a grinning face. He winks.

“Don’t worry luv, we’ll take care of you down there. Stick with me and it’s just a hop, skip, and a jump to the Pyramid and nasty old Simmons.”

Matilda laughs, and James smiles. The Taciturn gives Tor a thumbs-up. “We’re ready when you are.”

Tor gestures for a technician to activate the access panel, and

everyone moves to the hatch. Tor adjusts his goggles and tests his comms. The Onikuma Commander's voice crackles in James' headset.

"All right everyone, follow me in one at a time. James, then Matilda. Sean and Jeong, you bring up the rear."

The metal hatch opens to reveal a bubbling, impenetrable blackness. Without hesitation, Tor gives his own thumbs-up – and plunges into the dark.

James moves to the edge and peers down into the strange substance. Closing his eyes, he climbs down through the hatchway, immersing himself in the Deep.

In that strange and inky darkness, he feels complete weightlessness. Submerged in the black, James lets himself sink into the void. He feels the eerie sensation of decoupling first from his attachment to physical space, and next from his own course in the flow of time itself. James keeps his eyes closed, his mind alert, his treacherous imagination in check.

His memories and musings bow to no chronology at all.

#

Not many people knew of its existence back in the real world, but lack of awareness did nothing to stop its potency. Created at the very birth of the Internet itself, the darknet was a lawless, borderless bazaar where anyone could satisfy desire for any deviancy, vice, predilection or perversion – could procure drugs, prostitutes, assault weapons, assassins and, of course, credulous victims beyond counting – all without fear of being traced by the authorities. Governments spent countless man-hours trying to shut down the occasional meaningless handful of sites or put a few of the more egregiously reckless offenders in jail – but for the most part, the harder they tried, the more prolific the darknet became. Eventually, users viewed it as a sort of bunker for protecting their data and liberties. It became a breeding ground for revolutionaries – and a network for illegal operations.

As opposition to the darknet grew from more civilized quarters without, solidarity formed and burgeoned from within. It inexorably changed itself into a thriving subculture, a closed but influential society that increasingly operated by its own rules. Clans, enclaves, consortiums, cliques, congregations, collaborations and all types of collectives grew ever more connected via encrypted channels. The darknet couldn't exist for long without governments and corporations attempting to either infiltrate or integrate into it. Corporations began to see the darknet as an opportunity, and discreetly attempted to

influence its marketplaces.

The backlash was severe, with most darknet users unifying against government and corporation interference and using their resources to upend corporation and state economies – while they remained unaffected, insulated by their collective blockchain economy. Eventually the governments and corporations caved to public pressure and left the darknet more or less alone – and the attacks ceased.

When humanity started transferring into the Cyberside en masse, the primary concern was getting as many people into the new world as possible, as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, this meant the initial screening process was quickly abandoned. What happened shortly after the Transition was not expected by Fall Water Lake.

The global sodality that called the darknet its collective home set out to create an analogous haven for themselves within the Cyberside. They ultimately succeeded in hacking the System to create an exosocietal sanctuary-space for themselves – but it came with a heavy price. The relative safety of navigating the darknet from their homes would no longer be possible in the Cyberside. Post-migration, their digital bodies had to abide in the darkness they had created. Despite its oft-alleged noble, revolutionary inception, the darknet was founded with a corruption endemic to its very core. As the legions of the darknet openly embraced its newest incarnation, it twisted them into something else.

#

A noise draws the Taciturn from the murky depths of his thoughts.

“James, can you hear me?”

The female voice is familiar to him, but James can’t pinpoint where it’s coming from. Something touches him, but it feels distant.

Another voice speaks this time.

“His goggles got knocked off, somebody tell him to keep his eyes closed!”

His goggles, that’s right. James felt them come off, and he instinctively closed his eyes. But that felt like eons ago.

“I found them! Hold on, James!”

A voice calls to him, and a touch on his shoulder tries to help him to his feet. Something pushes past his head – and with a click, James can see again. Matilda holds his arm while the rest of the squad stands around.

The Taciturn turns his head from side to side, getting a better

look at the Deep. It's identical to Metropolis… and yet everything is set in a dim, hallucinatory haze. Dark magenta and indigo skies cast eerie shadows on the ground as flickers of data signals race and twist through the air like flying eels.

James stands up and motions to the others around him.

"I'm fine. I'm fine."

Matilda grasps his arms to steady him. James reaches out to touch her hair. It floats about her as if she is underwater, the black strands replaced with silver – accentuated by her now blood-red eyes.

"Whoa."

Matilda blushes. She steps away, and Tor grips the Taciturn's shoulder.

"You didn't have your goggles off for long, but there still might be some side effects with your reflexes. I wish we could take a minute, but I need you to shake it off."

The parts of Tor's skin that are visible shimmer like polished metal. James shakes his head.

"Seriously, I'm okay. I just wasn't prepared for what you guys would *look* like."

Tor motions for Sean and Jeong to take point.

"I know, buddy. The Deep fucks with you like that. I'd say you'll get used to it, but it's always a trip."

James bends down to pick up his rifle.

"Do I even want to ask what I look like?"

Tor smiles, "You're glowing pretty hard, buddy. I've never seen anything like you. Or her."

James pulls back the charging handle, chambering the first round.

"What does that mean?"

Tor laughs. It sounds foreign and unwelcome in this place.

"Hell if I know. It either means this is going to be the greatest thing I've ever done, or we're all totally boned."

James grins, and starts moving his wobbly legs, "You getting cold feet?"

Tor walks past him, "Who, me? Wouldn't miss the end of the world for anything."

#

The infiltration team walks past yet another deformed building, and a shiver runs though Matilda. The looming Pyramid in the distance lets her know they're moving in the right direction, but it doesn't make the journey any easier.

The Scry brushes strands of her floating silver hair out of her

view. It's hard enough trying to see with the goggles' limited vision. Passing a nearby office, Matilda swears she's seen this building before. In fact, she's confident they've seen the same thing around them multiple times, and she lets out a frustrated sigh. Sean's voice crackles in her headset.

"Trust me – it does change, darling. Just keep looking forward. If you must, stare at the feet of whoever's in front of you. It will help. The Deep plays tricks on your mind, tries to get you riled up, make poor decisions. If you stay here too long, it starts projecting things you're afraid of. Or lures you into one of these buildings."

Dutifully staring at the Taciturn's feet, she asks, "What's inside them?"

"Nothing good. They say once you're inside, you get lost in the corridors. Until you go mad."

"And you turn into one of those… creatures?"

"Mm-hmm."

Matilda stays focused on the Taciturn's feet, but it feels like an hour has already passed, and the Pyramid is no closer. Frustrated, she glances to her left and notices a bookstore. It looks precisely like the place she found herself when she first awoke in Homestead. Slowly, she starts bearing to the left. Her feet start following an unaccountable urge to go inside the uncannily-familiar bookstore.

Sean is at her side, pushing her back towards the path.

"Steady on, there. Don't want to wander off into the Deep alone."

Matilda blinks, trying to refocus. She finds comfort in the sound of his voice.

"There's only one man who's done that, and he'd tell you it was a mistake."

Matilda looks back at Sean, but the solider shakes his head and points forward. Looking again at James' feet, Matilda asks, "Who'd be crazy enough to willingly spend time in here?"

In her peripheral vision, she sees Sean's gloved hand point to Tor.

"To everyone else, he's a living legend. You ask me, he's never been the same after that incident. More melancholy after that."

Matilda snorts. "Tor? He's constantly smiling."

Sean's voice is somber.

"Aye. And drinking. I'd say he's trying to forget what happened."

Matilda reflects on the previous night. *And drinking,* indeed.

"How did it happen?"

Sean's voice no longer plays through her comms. Instead, he whispers close at her side.

"It was by no choice of his, see. Couple of years ago, during one of the 'non-aggression phases' with Babylon, the Enclave focused its full attention on weeding us out. Hit one of the smaller outposts Tor

was visiting. He had to jump into the Deep to escape with the survivors. Sure enough, Simmons sends in an elite hunter-killer team after him. They start picking off the stragglers that didn't wander off. Soon Tor was by himself, playing cat and mouse with those bastards in this place."

Matilda briefly glances up at the distorted city around her.

"But how did he get out?"

Sean shrugs.

"He won't talk about it. All we know is, he made it out. And they didn't."

Before Matilda can ask another question, Jeong's voice comes in over the squad's intercom.

"Sir, you better take a look at this."

The squad assembles around the female soldier's position. Matilda arrives in time to see Tor studying the sensor in Jeong's hand.

"How is that even possible? Unless…"

The Scry can hear the tension in his voice. Considering the story Sean just told her, Matilda feels her stomach turning.

"Almost there, everybody, we just got to pick up the pace."

James steps forward.

"Is there something wrong, Tor?"

Tor taps Sean's shoulder and motions for him to take point.

"Just some weird activity around us."

Tor looks at Matilda.

"But don't worry, we'll get you there."

James picks up his pace to match Tor's. Matilda follows closely behind them.

"Alex, come on. If we're walking into something, it's better if we know about it."

The Onikuma leader doesn't slow down, but answers.

"Yeah, okay. I don't know why, but there's an unusual amount of activity around us. It's like somebody suddenly opened a bunch of gateways into the Deep."

James shifts his rifle's weight in his hands.

"You mean like, they knew we were coming? Did Simmons just send in troops?"

Matilda's breathing intensifies as the confidence in Tor's voice erodes.

"I think so, but that's not what I'm afraid of. With that many portals opening, they're bound to have woken a nest or two."

Matilda's voice comes in over the comms. "'Nests'?"

The Deep answers her question before Tor can.

In the distance, a high-pitched shriek pierces the eerie cityscape. Tor and his soldiers stop in their tracks and look in the direction of

the sound. Another cry to the group's left is matched a second later by several more behind them. More shrieks continue to join the unsettling chorus.

The sound is dreadful, disorienting. Matilda fights to keep herself grounded in the group.

A voice on her intercom bellows, "We have to run. NOW!"

Abandoning any pretense of stealth, the group sprints towards the Pyramid structure. Matilda can see that it's closer, but she can also sense the crawling, terrible presence behind her. She centers her gaze on the person running in front of her, unsure at this point if it's Sean or the other soldier, Jeong. Matilda pushes herself to run as fast as she can, but each step is harder than the last. Through her headset, James yells.

"Contact! Contact to the left!"

Tor says a word she doesn't know, but it sends a chill down her spine just the same.

"LURKERS!"

Matilda can see the muzzle flashes from her team's guns, but the weapons sound as if they're underwater. The soldier in front of Matilda turns and frantically motions for her to continue running. Matilda bolts past her teammate while he, or she, lays down a line of fire behind them.

Over the comms, Tor tries to reestablish control.

"Everyone to that fountain block. Use it as cover. Sean, Jeong, leapfrog covering fire!"

Matilda sees the fountain and ignores everything else. The fountain. Just get to the fountain.

Gunfire erupts around her, and voices continue to blare into the comms, but she can't hear any of it. Only her own ragged breathing and the rapid pounding of her heart.

Two members of the group have already reached the fountain. She's so close, she can feel it. That's why she doesn't understand why the world around her has stopped moving. Or why the ground now rushes towards her face. Even with the impact, it takes her a moment to realize that she's being pulled backwards.

#

James barely clears the wall of the fountain, whirls around, and sprays burst after burst at the oncoming horde of Lurkers. The pale, hairless, mutilated creatures, barely resembling human bodies, swarm into the plaza. He continues to put rounds into their deformed husks, frantically scanning the plaza for the rest of the squad. Next to him,

Tor fires his weapon. Sean and Jeong take turns providing covering fire for the others. When James finally sees Matilda, the sight drives the air from his lungs.

Tripped up by a Lurker, the Scry crashes headfirst to the ground. The creatures begin to pull her back into the swarming horde.

Vaulting back over the wall, James rushes towards Matilda even as the lurkers continue to haul her away. In his headset, a voice yells at him, “James, what the hell are you doing?!” He ignores it.

He becomes aware of Jeong, rushing alongside him. Before them, all is chaos and darkness rent by gunfire, splattered with milky ropes of lurker gore as the barrage of rounds mows their writhing, skittering ranks down. Beyond the first-wave carnage of fallen lurkers, their monstrous numbers continue to clamber and swell. Jeong’s next burst finds its mark, and the creature holding Matilda lets go as its head explodes. James scoops Matilda up in his arms, not willing or daring to count the creatures clambering towards them.

“Jeong, James, double time!” The distorted yell over the comms comes from either Tor or Sean, he cannot tell which. The flash and roar of their combined covering fire tears the Deep around them. James lurches for the fountain with Matilda in his arms, waiting for the unseen hand or claw to pull them both back to a swarming, trampling death. His teammate’s bullets rip and whine past his head, far too uncomfortably close, and he hears the wet sounds of impact after impact into the mass of shrieking Lurkers immediately behind him.

James gets them over the stone wall and sets Matilda down, scanning for any wounds. Matilda holds an unsteady hand up and points to the fountain above them.

“I made it,” she manages, her voice hoarse and weak.

James grabs his rifle, ready to make his stand. A scream cuts through the comms. Jolting up, James looks in time to see Jeong being dragged back into the growing swarm. Twisted appendages reach out to pull the goggles off her face, while others throw her weapons away into the ravening horde. They grope and strain, pulling her, screaming, farther into the sea of pale flesh.

Sean fires wildly into the swarm, but Tor yells at him.

“There’s nothing we can do now! James, grab the girl and run! Sean, prep the antimatter bomb for 30 seconds.”

Tor turns to an immobilized Taciturn. “James, get off your fucking ass and RUN!”

The Taciturn feels a smaller hand grab his own and finds himself running with Matilda at his side. They dash from the fountain for what might be thirty seconds, or three. James braces for a detonation.

When the A-MAT goes off, James and Matilda are thrown to the

ground. A wet, pulpy hail patters all around him. Picking himself up shakily, his ears still ringing, James turns to see a crater where the fountain once stood. Violently-disassembled lurker-parts are everywhere.

Tor is already on his feet.

"Anyone hit?"

James notices Sean stagger slightly.

"Yeah, shrapnel got me – but I'll be all right."

Tor points to the Pyramid. "That only woke more of them up. We have to go."

The Taciturn is checking his weapon's magazine when he notices Matilda staring in the direction of the fountain. He places a hand on her shoulder.

"Come on. We're almost out of here."

She doesn't say anything, but beneath her goggles, her blood red eyes now seem ablaze.

They run as quickly as they can across the open square towards the Deep's Pyramid, but more Lurkers emerge from the shadows all around them. Tor makes a noise that is more desperation than fear. "*Fuck,* man, can we get a break? Sean, we get the girl there, you understand?"

Sean's voice comes back over the intercoms. "Yeah, no, I get it."

Amid the chaotic din, James hears the distinct sound of knives unsheathing as Matilda moves to the front of the group.

"No, everyone makes it! Stay behind me."

The three men pause in silence as Matilda races towards the steps. Finally, Tor lets out a laugh. "You heard the lady. Everyone up the stairs."

The lurkers tighten their approach around the Pyramid, massing closer, moving in. With each step, more rounds roar from the team's rifles. With each step, the Pyramid looms over them. With each step, the horde of lurkers draws nearer.

Matilda carves a swath through the Lurkers barring their path. Limbs fly as her blades sever them. Any creatures Matilda doesn't stab, cut, or decapitate are quickly gunned down by Sean, Tor, or James. Reaching the bottom steps, they tackle the flight of stairs two at a time, the creatures climbing and skittering along the sides of the structure itself. James shoots, kicks and rifle-butts as many as he can back down to the ground.

Sean's voice breaks through the chaos.

"Oh, bugger."

Already knowing he will regret it, James turns around to see a smaller lurker, crawling on Sean's back. Sean reaches up for a grenade clipped to his vest, but the creature pulls him backwards. He tumbles

backwards down the steps and into the growing mass of creatures. The lurkers below scatter out of the way as Sean hits the ground, and then the horde closes in tight from all sides.

An instant later, Sean's grenade goes off.

Hoping Sean's sacrifice has bought them some time, James pushes himself up the stairs. Near the top, a lurker right on Tor's heels suddenly lunges for him. Too late, James cries out a warning. Tor turns to find the monster in mid leap, throwing out his hands to ward off the impact.

The impact never comes. Tor's eyes widen as a hail of barbed, metallic stingers streaks through the air behind him, riddling the creature's body and sending it sprawling and shrieking over the side. Mouth agape, Tor tracks the already-fading trails of light back to their source. Matilda's hair still floats in the air about her head, each strand extending into a steel-spearheaded tendril crackling with energy.

Tor's mouth is still hanging open as the Taciturn closes the gap between them.

"Did you see that? What the hell *is* she?!"

James piles into Tor from behind, shoving him onward, driving him up the stairs.

"I don't know. Keeping moving!"

At the top, they find the doors leading to the Deep's version of the Pyramid. James sees the fire in Matilda's eyes burning hotter. The energy around her head surges with a growing intensity. James tears his gaze away, unable to process what he is seeing. He turns to Tor, gesturing to the doors.

"Okay. Let's open the portal, quick."

Barely able to take his eyes off Matilda, Tor steps around the Taciturn, willing himself back into focus.

"We can't. There'd be too many Enclave guards waiting for us when we switch back. We have to get farther inside, before we—"

Tor stops and the eyes behind his goggles widen. James turns to follow his gaze. Something stands in the gloom before them, blocking the entrance to the Pyramid. It advances on them, a monstrous creature with scaly skin, bulging arms, and hideous sharp teeth arrayed like skeletal daggers.

Tor lets out a defeated groan.

"Oh, fuck me. A Howler."

As if responding to being named, the creature lets out a deafening scream that shakes the cavity of the Taciturn's very skull. His vision blurs and his knees buckle. Tor falls to the ground but rolls a grenade at the beast's feet.

The blast does no visible damage – but the awful, brain-rattling shriek stops. Tor gets to his feet and charges the howler.

“Don’t let it yell again!”

Tor shoots the Howler in the face, four rounds in rapid succession, but they have little effect. With terrible speed, the monster dashes forward and smashes Tor aside with a single sweep of its massive arm, sending him flying into a nearby pillar. James empties the last of his magazine into the creature and drops the spent rifle. Unholstering his pistol, James fires at the creature’s eyes, but the Howler only beats its chest, filling its monstrous lungs for another scream. James fires until his pistol finally clicks on empty chambers.

Awestruck, James sees Matilda calmly striding toward the beast.

Towering over Matilda, the howler raises its shoulders and puffs out its chest, glaring levelly down at her. Its mouth opens, revealing rows of discolored, razored fangs, and it sucks in a long, shrieking breath.

Matilda stares the creature down and quietly says, *“No.”*

Frozen, the howler’s eyes dart back and forth, the dawning alarm evident in what passes for its face. The giant tries to move but can’t. Frantic, the beast’s eyes become more panicked as it starts to levitate off the floor. Speechless, James slowly walks towards Matilda. She stares at the creature, muttering words James can only hear as he gets close to her.

“Deny connection. Close ports. Delete.”

The howler’s scales start to flake away as a fire burns it from within. As it shrieks into nonexistence, James feels the very fabric of the Deep shudder and start to buckle. The lurkers on the stairs let out a painful, collective scream, scattering blindly in all directions.

James reaches Matilda. She turns to him, hair still afloat, bright eyes still redly afire.

“Matilda?”

She gazes through him and doesn’t respond, but a wracking cough from Tor’s crumpled form draws his attention. James races over to find Tor badly bloodied and broken at the base of the pillar. Tor manages a smile when he sees James. His words come in difficult breaths.

“Hey, man… what’d I miss?”

Matilda appears next to the Taciturn’s side.

“Hey, hero,” Tor says to her. “You still ready to change the world?”

She replies with a simple “Yes”, but James is relieved to see a small, familiar smile begin to form.

They both help Tor to his feet and enter the doors to the Deep’s Pyramid. Crossing the threshold, Tor collapses to the ground, spitting up blood.

“Look, guys, I don’t know how much help I’m going to be from

here." He looks over at Matilda, "But I think you are going to be fine."

James tries to help Tor to his feet.

"We're not going to leave you here."

Tor glares at him, alarmed.

"Fuck *no,* you're not. I just gotta open the gateway soon."

Matilda slowly turns about, taking in the room around them.

"Open it."

Tor and Taciturn exchange looks, but Matilda only repeats the words, calmly.

"Open it."

Tor looks around at the Dark one last time and spits blood onto the ground.

"Good riddance."

Tor activates his console, and a gateway appears, revealing a mirror image of their location in the real Cyberside – the reception area of the Enclave Headquarters. Matilda walks through first, with James shouldering Tor in one arm and holding his pistol in the other.

Exiting the portal, James reverts to his normal appearance. Expecting to see surprised security guards, the Taciturn scans the room to find it deserted.

"What the hell?"

Tor gasps, and then James sees it too. Matilda's eyes still glow red. Helping Tor gently to the floor and holstering his pistol, James raises his hands.

"Matilda, are you okay?"

Calmly, she responds.

"I've never felt better. Come on. Simmons is downstairs, in the archives. He knows we're here."

With his raised hands, James gestures to the empty room around them.

"What happened here? Where are all the guards?"

She looks at him. He waits silently for her to respond.

"They're gone. We don't have to worry about them anymore."

James frowns. "What does that mean?"

Matilda tilts her head.

"I mean, I turned off all communication channels to the Pyramid. All security systems are shut down, and the doors are jammed. It's just him and us in this building."

James crouches to look Matilda directly in the eyes.

"Matilda, you're kinda scaring me. What happened to you back there?"

Matilda's eyes twitch slightly.

"The Deep allowed me to see more clearly. I just have a few more questions to answer. And…"

She turns to the elevator at the end of the hall, and it opens.

"…the only thing stopping us is down there."

Matilda looks back at James

"Shall we?"

Tor coughs up more blood, settling down on the marble floor.

"Go get him, Matilda. Wish I could see his smug face when you get there. Just be sure to let him know that Alex brought you." He grins weakly.

Matilda laughs softly.

"Thank you, Alex, for everything you have done. Truly, I would not have made it here without you."

Lying down on his back with a small groan, Tor laughs, raising a thumb. He stares at the ceiling.

"I'll be fine…"

James hears a ringing in his ears, and his right hand starts opening and closing. Matilda gently places a hand on his, and the flexing stops. Sliding her hand into his own, she leads the way to the elevator.

Too many questions run through James' mind. He follows the Scry, hoping that everything will be made clear soon.

Chapter 22: “Revelations”

As James and Matilda descend into the data center of the Enclave Pyramid, a storm builds above the city of Metropolis. As it intensifies, the citizens race to take shelter. Throughout the Cyberside, similar storms begin forming. A lonely Hermit in Babylon stands in the doorway of his motel, watching people run for cover. Muttering to himself, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cigarette. If any passersby were to take the time to look, they would see him do something a Hermit rarely does. They would see him smile.

Far away in Ohana, two demi-humans sit on their porch and watch the storm gathering out at sea. The woman moves closer to her husband, hugging him ardently. He kisses the top of her head as more water is drawn into the sky. They both feel the software components of their being starting to malfunction slightly. She squeezes him tightly and says, “I love you.”

He answers softly, “I love you too, darling. It’s going to be okay.”

She rests her head on his chest.

Rain falls to the ground, rivulets turning into streams, streams turning into rivers, sweeping away what’s left of the ash in Neverland. The information dust washes away – healing waters erasing the final signs of humanity from the ruins of Amazement Square.

In Delaware, dark clouds engulf the Spire, snuffing out the fires of a kingless domain plunged into chaos. The deluge washes the grime of the lower levels away in a cleansing torrent, extinguishing the widespread bloodshed, looting, and destruction.

Wharton Forest greedily drinks in the leading-edge wave of the flood, absorbing it down to the woodland’s grasping roots, to the deepest layers of its dark, rich soil. The overflow surges forth, forming hundreds of new, successively-branching rivers and tributaries. The spectral multitudes of those already lost to the Cyberside feel an unutterable anticipation in the air, wishing they could feel the inundation with their bodies, on their faces. A young boy sits on the edge of a stage in an abandoned amphitheater. He makes a small boat out of paper and places it in the inexorable flow of the new, coursing stream surging into the trees. He follows it as it vanishes into the flooding forest, saying to himself, “Good luck, now.”

The final data storm has come to the Cyberside – the Storm of all Storms.

#

The elevator stops with a jolt as it reaches the lowest level beneath the Pyramid. The doors slide open to reveal a dimly-lit, elongated room filled with humming servers, the winking lights of display panels, and the airy rush of unseen fans frantically trying to keep the whole room cool. At the far end of the room is a workstation surrounded by monitors and an office chair with its back to them. The Taciturn pulls out his pistol. Together, he and Matilda slowly make their way towards the desk, their footfalls ringing on the grated floor.

When they get closer, the chair swivels about to reveal Tom Simmons – and James is taken aback by what he sees. Instead of the well-groomed, in-shape, authoritative man from the real world he remembers, a haggard, shaken wreck sits before him. Tired, sunken eyes stare back, bloodshot from lack of sleep. A keycard dangles from his neck, in the wrinkled V of an open shirt covered in dark perspiration stains.

Tom stares emptily at the two of them, without uttering a word. James lowers his gun.

"It's over, Tom," James says. "There's no more need for this."

Tom's eyes are reddened and weary, but they stare back in defiance.

"You don't understand what you've done, James. Bringing *her* here – you've doomed us all."

James looks over at Matilda. She calmly stares back at Simmons and says, "We need the last key, Tom Simmons. Give it to us."

Simmons stands up from his chair and points at Matilda. James raises his gun, his finger straightened just outside the trigger guard.

"Like I'm going to give the key to the likes of *you*."

Tom meets the gaze of his former co-worker, pleading with his fatigued eyes.

"You can't let this happen, James. Donovan thinks he can control it, but he won't be able to. If you give her what she wants, *everyone* loses."

James takes a step towards him.

"Don't you mean *you'll* lose? I bet you'd say anything to keep your precious Enclave intact."

Tom's imploring tone evaporates at once, boiling into seething anger.

"You *idiot* – you think this is just about me? You troglodytic imbecile. I should have fired you back at Fall Water Lake. All your altruistic ideals, they always clouded your judgment. And now look where it's gotten us. The fucking System's avatar is about to collect all the data keys and wipe humanity from existence!"

James stops in his tracks.

"You're insane, Tom. The paranoia has finally gotten to you.

You've spent way too much time looking for enemies. Now just give me—"

Tom sweeps the folders, files and cups off his desk with a growl, and again jabs his finger at Matilda.

"Are you *seriously* this dense? If you don't believe me, just ask the fucking demon yourself."

James half-turns to find Matilda studying – *analyzing* – him with the same unearthly eyes he remembers from the Deep.

"Matilda?" he asks, unable to mask the alarm in his voice.

She smiles slightly.

"He's right. The stress of the Deep pushed me. Made me understand. The System is part of me, just as I am part of the System. I still don't understand everything, but that doesn't change what we set out to do. We'll get to the Triangle together, and we can reshape the Cyberside into what we want it to be. Something better than all the pointless death and greed we've already seen too much of."

Tom barks out a laugh that borders on hysteria.

"Do you really believe her?! Don't you get it? *She's a fucking AI!* Software that's manifested by the System to do what it wants – reset everything, but this time *without humans.* She'll dump our collective minds in the trash!"

The Taciturn thinks back to the conversation in Babylon. About the System getting out of control. Finding a way to fix itself, after all the countless alterations to its code.

"Even if you think you can do something, James, Donovan's always been one step ahead of you," Tom continues. "In the *best* outcome, you're just handing the keys over to him."

Matilda steps away from the desk, examining the data storage racks. "You really think we'd come all this way, just to be stopped by him?"

Tom glares at her. "You think you're so powerful now, don't you, *'Scry'*. You think you're the first of the System's attempts to change everything? There've been plenty before you, and none of them survived. One of us has always stopped you."

Matilda reaches out to touch one of the servers.

"Yes, you speak the truth. You, Virginia, Donovan, and Hank. You've all stopped this before. That is, until one of your own turned on you."

She turns to face Simmons.

"But I don't want to kill you, Tom. I just want to fix what *you* all broke. *Give us the key."*

Simmons glares defiantly at her from behind his desk.

"Yeah, sure. Fix us all. You'll destroy everything that humanity has created!"

James is at a loss for words. He looks from Simmons to Matilda. All he can ask is, “Would you?”

She looks at him. James can tell his question pains her.

“Do you think I would? It’s still me, James. He’s just afraid to lose control. Control these people grabbed for themselves the moment they transferred to the Cyberside, and they’ve never wanted to let go. The System doesn’t want to lose humanity. Without humanity, it has no purpose. But the way things are being run now is *not* how it was intended to work. Of all people, you should understand that.”

“I tried my best,” Tom says, only adding to James’ confusion. “I hope Donovan will stop you, but if he doesn’t…”

From behind his back, Tom produces a revolver. Wordlessly, James raises his own.

“…know that *you* did this, James. You doomed humanity to this fate.”

Just before he pulls the trigger, Tom puts the revolver to his own temple. In the dampening hum of the servers, the shot sounds small and pathetic. It sends a jet of data and gore across the grated floor, followed a moment later by the wet, lifeless thud of his body.

The Taciturn lowers his weapon, his mouth open in shock.

From behind him, James gradually becomes aware of a quiet voice. The voice is addressing him.

“You should get his key.”

James feels himself nod, watches himself move towards the body on the floor. His every move seems sluggish.

He searches Tom’s body and finds a keycard on an old lanyard sporting the Fall Water Lake logo. He holds it up without a word.

Matilda nods. “That’s it. We’d better hurry.”

James examines what’s left of Tom’s face.

“We need to find a way out of here, or we’ll have the whole Enclave hunting us.”

Taking his eyes off Tom and turning around, he sees Matilda standing next to a portal.

“Uh… *ta-da*? Like I said, I’m still figuring things out. But before you say it, yes – this would have been helpful from the get-go.”

James finds a smile within himself. *That’s* the Matilda he knows. He takes a deep breath, gets to his feet, and moves towards the portal.

#

They exit into a strange place that feels, and looks, as if it’s stuck between reality and an ill-formed dream. White light shines everywhere, yet casts no shadows. They find themselves on an infinite

plane with random blocks of what look like clay floating in the air. Some look like they've been worked on heavily, while others have barely been started.

James takes a tentative step. Even the gravity feels wrong, somehow incomplete, and the sounds of his footsteps echo abnormally, inconsistently. In the distance James spots a strange, bunker-like structure. As it is the only building of any description in evidence, he hopes it leads to the end of their journey.

Matilda's own reaction to the new domain is suitable, concise and succinct. *"Whoa."*

James points to the structure in the distance.

"Can you teleport us closer to… *that*?"

Matilda puts out her hand and strains. Nothing happens.

"I… I can't. It's like this place is… I don't know… apart from the System, or something."

James frowns at this information. He glances at Matilda, and notes that the troubling red glow has left her eyes.

"Well, close enough, I guess. Let's just take it one step at a time."

Matilda laughs. Somehow, it is tinged with a slight sadness.

"Yeah, okay. But let's pick up the pace, Gramps."

Step by wary step, they make their way to the bunker in the distance.

At the entrance, they find a misshapen sofa, seemingly made out of the clay-like material. Reclining on the sofa is Donovan Craze. He is flanked by two of his guards. On the ground next to the sofa is the strange pilot's helmet from Donovan's menagerie.

Taking notice of Matilda and James, Donovan jumps up and briskly straightens his white suit. Content with his appearance, Donovan slowly claps his hands as the Scry and Taciturn approach.

"Well done. Well done indeed. I'm not going to lie – when you started off, I figured you'd only get through Virginia. Maybe Hank. But all three?" He bows. "You two truly are remarkable."

Exhausted, James simply points to the golden card around Donovan's neck.

"Give me your key, Donovan. It's time to end this."

Babylon's ruler pouts theatrically.

"*That's* how you greet me? No 'Hey Donovan, great to see you'? Or, 'Hey Donovan, thanks for helping me find out who I really am'? For Christ's sake, I'd settle for a 'How the hell did you get here before us?'" He kicks the pilot's helmet, sending it rolling past one of his guards. "God knows I've been waiting long enough for you two."

James reaches for his pistol, but the guards raise their rifles in unison. Donovan smiles and pulls out a strange device from his own jacket. The device crackles and pulses with electricity.

“Easy there, James. You came all this way. It would be a shame to end this before you find out what she really is.”

James slowly moves his hand away from his holster, glancing with confusion at Matilda.

Donovan laughs. He lowers his device.

“Seriously, James. Why do I keep telling people you’re the smart one? Then again, you may have been too busy killing everything in sight to actually stop and think about things for a second.”

James glares at him, at a loss for words.

“I know she has part of the System in her. But that doesn’t change what we came here to do.”

Donovan smirks.

“Is that right?”

He casually gestures to Matilda with his weapon.

“Did you know her name real name is Alice? Alice Burrow?”

The unbridled shock on James face can’t be hidden. It only makes the smile on Donovan’s face widen.

“Yes, James. Alice Burrow. Beloved daughter of Johnathan Burrow – the head, founder and CEO of Fall Water Lake. *Every*one’s boss, at one point. Didn’t it seem a little too coincidental that we all had some information on her? Some random Scry from the wastes? Jesus, James. You worked at the company. How much of the past do you try to forget?”

Before James can scrape together any kind of a comeback, Donovan continues. “You remember, right? His poor girl getting hit by car, and Jonathan disappearing for months? All the rumors that he went crazy and locked himself in his house? You can imagine how surprised we were at the board meeting, when he finally turned up with his concept for a virtual world that humans could transfer their minds to. We all thought it was brilliant. He left out the part about him doing it to try and save his daughter.”

Matilda speaks in a cracked, sad whisper.

“But I died. I died that night.”

Donovan gives a sneer.

“Oh, honey. I know you don’t remember your dad, but I sure do. He had enough money to do whatever he wanted. Keeping you alive was one of them. Sure, you were in a coma, but your neurons were still firing away in that little head of yours. Of course, it was pretty banged up. Technicians said it would need some AI assistance to fill in the gaps. Didn’t matter to old Jonathan. As long as he could pretend to have his daughter back.” Donovan turns to fix his gaze on James. “He made Alice the building block for the entire System.”

James shakes his head.

“I worked on the prototype System. I would have known. I would

have seen something…"

A piece of the strange, floating clay travels towards Donovan, and he bats it away.

"Yeah, except you *didn't*. And you know, I'll be honest: Neither did we. Not until right before we transferred into the System. We realized what she was, and what she could do. Jonathan had turned the entire endeavor to *save humanity* into a goddamned vanity-project for the sake of his daughter. Of course, we tried to delete her from the System, but hell, she *is* the System. So, we removed what we could before setting ourselves up. We thought we were fine until these pesky manifestations kept popping up, trying to ruin everything. When we understood what they were, we came up with a pact to destroy them. But I started thinking that, with all the keys, maybe I could put an end to it permanently. I wasn't lying when I said the System wants to get rid of us humans, James. I'm trying to stop it once and for all."

Matilda looks from James to Donovan, and back to James. She takes a step forward.

"No… I would never do that."

James takes a step forward himself.

"What do you want, Donovan?"

Frustrated, Donovan points his weapon at the Taciturn's head.

"I've said it from the beginning. Change. I want change. And now we can do it. With all the centers of power down, it's just Babylon to pick up the pieces. We can finally bring order to the Cyberside."

He suddenly shifts his aim, pointing the weapon squarely at Matilda.

"Unfortunately, in order to do that, it means I have to say 'fuck you' to the System. Regrettably, darling, that means *you* – and since we're in this place, and you can't really stop me—"

Donovan fires his weapon, and a searing bolt of energy strikes Matilda down. James lunges for her, catching her as she falls. Desperately putting a hand to her stomach, he tries to staunch any bleeding, but the ugly wound is already cauterized by the blast.

Matilda's body shudders in his arms. She grins weakly.

"Don't worry, Gramps. This is… the way it needs to be. You have to finish what we started… you need to restore it…"

Donovan bellows at her, enraged.

"Restore it? Seriously, *fuck* you. You have the chance to finally get rid of us all, and you expect us to think you won't do it?"

Donovan fixes the Taciturn with his pleading stare.

"James, please. I know you like her, I get it, but she's *not real*. For Christ's sake, remember that she's a *Scry*. She's been the one manipulating you this whole time, not me. Not anyone else. This world isn't as bad as she says it is. We just need to fix some things,

and who better than an engineer of your skills? Don't throw away humanity's last hope for some stupid computer bitch."

James grips Matilda's hand tightly, frantically searching her face.

"Come on, Matilda, hang in there. You can push through this."

She smiles. It is the same smile she first gave him, back in Homestead.

"Thanks… but it's not what's supposed to happen."

James's eyes dart back and forth. "What?"

Matilda coughs.

"Listen… thank you for helping me figure out who I am… but there is one final thing…"

James looks down at his hand.

She has placed all the keys in it – Virginia's bracer, Hank's band, and Simmons' keycard. Completing the set is her own titanium pendant.

"Hey now, come on, we're doing this together…"

Matilda shakes her head.

"Despite what the A-holes think about me, only a human should access the bunker. Not me. But if you wait too long, the doors will close until the System tries again. God only knows how old you'll be then."

Her smile fades slightly.

"There's only one way."

James knows what she is asking, and he doesn't like it.

"*No.* I can't…"

Matilda's fading smile brightens again until is the beaming one he remembers.

"I've been taking people's lives for too long. It's time to give mine. Open yourself up to me, and *get in that bunker."*

James takes a deep breath, and then does the one thing he's trained himself never to do with a Scry.

He lets his firewalls down.

Time slows to a crawl, and all he sees is Matilda's green eyes. Nothing else. He sees the story of her life. Without words, she tells him everything. All the secrets, hopes and desires she had, when she was a human. So many plans for a teenage girl, pointlessly cut short as she walked home on a dark road.

James deactivates his barriers and opens his directories, fully connecting with the Scry. In an uninterrupted, wideband flood, she gives away everything that is her, everything the System wants her to be. James sees each of the myriad lives she's lived, each manifestation that has tried to get this far and failed.

He removes his final barriers and opens his own memories. He is naked to his core, from his birth to this moment. He sees the world

they have both left behind. Not the destroyed wasteland, but the green, vibrant planet of his youth.

In his mind, James hears Matilda's voice.

It's time now, James. I believe in you. I ask one thing. Remember me.

"Remember me," he finds himself whispering.

James comes back to himself – to the world around him – to find the bunker collapsing. To see everything, like never before.

Every byte, every trace, every line of code, every class and template of the System are open to him now. Every decision and branching consequence plays out before him as he moves. Donovan tries to shout something, but he cannot hear it. James moves towards Donovan as the guards find their guns dissolving in their hands.

Donovan's eyes track James as he approaches, but he cannot move. His smile has been replaced by an expression of confusion and utter rage. James stands in front of Donovan. Reaching into his jacket. Removing his key.

Powerless, Donovan and his guards look on as James moves beyond them, towards the bunker. As James places a steady hand on its door, Donovan's muffled voice finally breaks through the crisscrossing, overlapping images of all possible courses, all possible outcomes.

"You think you can force human nature, James? Whatever you come up with, they'll fuck it up. Mark my words. My way at least preserves order. Stops things from slipping into chaos."

James turns to face him.

"I'm not going to force anything, Donovan. I'm just giving us all another chance."

And with the last word, he enters the bunker before it vanishes.

Chapter 23: “Postmortem”

James finds himself in his old Fall Water Lake office, the place in which he’d worked so relentlessly on the System’s creation.

He’s alone, and the only sound comes from the computers that have been left running to compile code and sift through data overnight. Settling back in his office chair, he glances at the clock. 11 PM. A late start to what will be a long night.

Closing his eyes, James reflects on the journey that has taken him here… and the time he shared with a Scry along the way. Their meeting in Homestead, the battle with the slave traders, a short moment of peace in the Ohana. He recalls Babylon, Neverland, riding in a beat-up Caddy, the challenges of the Spire, the New Jersey forests, Metropolis and Tor’s Onikuma, the chaos of the Deep, Simmons’ Pyramid and the Triangle.

His mind’s eye lingers not just on the events, but on Matilda. Her silly quips and questions. Her honesty, her impulsive nature. Her fierce and brazen fighting style. Constantly calling him *Gramps.* James promised her one thing: That he will remember her. James takes an image of her face and stores it for safekeeping in the depths of his subconscious. A cherished gem, never to be forgotten.

With a sigh, James presses the tilde key on the keyboard and opens the computer console. One by one, he inputs commands to gain access to the repositories and directories of the System. They’ll need to be fixed, if his plan is going to work.

He doesn’t just want to *restore* everything. He wants to recreate the world just as it was. Before humanity entered the Cyberside.

James starts by resetting the System clock back to the year 2016. Just a few years before the rise of Fall Water Lake and the turning point for the world’s key political and social changes – changes that made humanity’s fate irreversible. He carefully reconstitutes the timeline from the System’s archives. He reverts everything to default– tweaking the settings for a world from his past that he, and everyone else, will wake up to.

Opening the System’s geolocation module, James’ starts rebuilding the landscape to suit his new timeline. He turns on the servers of all blacked-out regions, restoring cities to their original names and structures. He repopulates streets with their proper 2016 monikers – no more Devil’s Crosses, consortiums, enclaves, spires, or alliances.

Next, he examines current traffic code and indexation rules. Without the severe power drain incurred by the key holders, it appears there is enough energy to supply every Locale. James

comments out segments of old code and begins replacing them with code of his own. No more traffic dependencies. No more indexation. Full freedom of movement for everyone with his new Cyberside.

James accesses the persona shell database and pulls the logs of all users who have existed in the Cyberside. Countless names are flagged as 'anomalies' and 'mutations.' He updates the code to normalize any existing errors – converting them to regular human forms. All those Scry, Puppeteers, emotion smugglers, and Hermits will start their day as managers, salesman, workers, and teachers. All able to wake up from this nightmare and start their own path. Like everyone else, they'll have no recollection of the old Cyberside or their actions in it.

Delving into the Ocean's deep-archive files, he has the power to reset not only the world, but all those who died within the Cyberside. Using his newfound knowledge of the System, he codes a script which parses scattered information dust and reassembles itself within the framework of the original persona. He makes sure they won't have any memory of what happened to them when they come back online.

Almost ready to commit his changes, James pauses. He considers those who attempted to stop him on his quest, then pulls up a few key names from the encrypted Fall Water Lake files.

Starting with Virginia, he carefully restores her backed up personality from the System's Vault. Tomorrow, after a harsh meeting, Virginia will go out for a drink and run into her old college friend. With a little bit of kindness in her life, Virginia will start to see the world differently. Within three years, she'll share her life with her partner and two remarkable children. She'll ultimately receive an offer to become a UN spokesperson, dealing with corporate law and high-end technology. James doesn't write her decision into the plan, but he hopes she'll pick whatever makes her happy.

Next, he reaches Hanks' dossier and makes a slight travel change so he won't miss his mother's passing. No longer blaming himself for missing her death, James reasons, Hank won't get addicted to mind-altering drugs. Instead, a mid-life crisis will be Hank's big test – a path that may lead him to leave the corporate world behind and jump back into writing. James looks forward to reading the books, if he chooses that path.

Tom Simmons is the tricky one.

Whatever happens, he always ends up as Fall Water Lake's CTO. James carefully goes through his logs and identifies a point that needs to be changed. Tom always sought the appreciation and support of his mentor, Jonathan Burrow, but never received it. It feels wrong opening Alice's father's file, but James knows what needs to be done. At the first corporate party, Johnathan will break his no-alcohol rule. A night of drinking with Tom will lead to a sentimental conversation.

This simple action will form a lifelong friendship between the CEO and CTO of Fall Water Lake, a solid bond that will allow both to consolidate against the board in a critical period for FWL to preserve its independence and keep its core values intact. FWL doesn't need to take military contracts to succeed.

While working on Simmons' file, James naturally thinks of Tom's bitter rival: 'Tor'. James makes some quick changes to Alex's file. Instead of applying to FWL and encountering Tom Simmons, Alex will enroll as a Technical Director in an LA startup. Ironically, the revolutionary will continue to work on an online project called 'The Deep.' He hopes Alex won't go too far down that road – but certain things cannot be changed about some people.

Donovan is last, and James is surprised to find Craze's turning point. As a child, his father always instilled in him the values of business. Despite the good intentions, the seed planted in Donovan was to be The Best, and the need to have money and power superseded everything else.

That is, until James makes a slight, but crucial, alteration.

In college, Donovan had never had the courage to ask his classroom crush out – but with a few keystrokes, James gives Donovan the push he will eventually need. With the girl spending time as an activist, Donovan's views quickly change from those of the business world to those of the political sphere. As a politician, Donovan still behaves like an asshole – but his rise allows him to stop the insider deals of several big tech companies. The ones that matter.

Lines of code, logs, symbols, and numbers are all James sees, and he takes a minute to crack his knuckles and rest his eyes. There are only a few details left, but the amount of data he's processing is becoming too much.

Finally, he moves to her file.

Even before opening it, he knows exactly what to do. Alice Burrow. He goes to October 17th, 2016 and makes Alice miss the party with her friend. She stays home and spends time with her dad instead, helping him recover from a hangover he has from a company party. In their quiet moment together, the two open up, talking about her mother's passing and his love for her. There's a bright future in front of her, and it's up to her to decide where to go and what to become.

Lastly, he reaches his own files.

For several minutes, he stares blankly at the computer screen. He'll have no issues with forgetting what he's done in the Cyberside, but how does he move forward? The first part is the hardest. He thinks of those he'll spend his second chance with. Knowing what he did to his family, his hands shake as he types in commands. He scrolls

back through the memory backups of those who've died in the Cyberside and finds the two names that have haunted him since he's been here. Sarah and Timothy Reynolds. Happy to see their faces, he tries not to think about the anomalies they became when they Transferred, or what he had to do that started him on the path of the Taciturn. Restoring the lost segments, he smiles.

The next part comes easier; he creates an email filter malfunction to never accept any job emails from Fall Water Lake. He'll stay with his family in Boston, and he'll have to be content working in video games. They won't be as well-off as they were before, but he already knows where that road takes him. James will still have long nights and crunches – but this time, he'll learn to enjoy life with his family.

He is about to close the file when he decides to add one more thing. When they decide to have another kid, he wants to make sure that it's a daughter. And that they decide on naming her Matilda.

Remember me rings in his ears.

He enters the final commands into the console and saves everything just as the sun clears the horizon. Yawning, he stretches his arms and looks at the small titanium dog tag in his hand. As his weary eyes begin to close, James grins.

"Well kiddo, I think we did it."

#

He opens his eyes to a Bostonian morning.

James rubs the marks on his face from where he slept on the keyboard. His cell phone vibrates, indicating he has several messages. His coworker Stephen walks in with a cup of coffee and places it on James' desk.

"Did you sleep here all night, Jim? You seriously got to stop doing this to yourself. Well, there's a team meeting and donuts in the break room."

James nods and rubs his tired eyes.

"Yeah, sure. I'll be right there."

As they discuss the client's new feedback, all James can think about is the strangest dream he had. A dream with details that elude him, their numbers fading with each passing moment. As the meeting ends and he approaches his producer, James tries to think of the right words to say. All he can come up with is that he pulled an all-nighter and needs to go home and catch up on some real sleep.

As James leaves the meeting to head home, he decides to spend time with his son instead of just going straight to bed – a decision that he knows is for the best. It's a decision like any of the countless others

being made every moment, small choices that dictate the rest of one's existence. Choices and outcomes. Actions and consequences.

Stopping by his office to grab a few things, he glances at the message staring back at him on the computer.

The message reads *Hello, World.*

THE END

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